

The
Presence of God:
A Commentary on Esther
Our God Is a Saving God

Steven Hudgik

The Presence of God – Commentary on Esther

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First Edition

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The MTA ministry (Move to Assurance) is an outreach and discipleship ministry bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to the lost.

Our goal with the Quick Commentary series is to provide a series of short commentaries on popular sections of scripture that are commonly misunderstood. Written so the layperson can easily understand them, I hope these books are useful to new Christians as well as those who are mature in their faith.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my former dentist, now retired, who has given me a number of excellent books, one of which inspired me to study the book of Esther. Thank you Rick!

Esther was taken to the king's palace into the custody of Hegai, who was in charge of the women.

Now the young lady pleased him and found favor with him.— Esther 2:8b-9a

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1 - What's The Story?	5
2 - Fact or Fiction?	9
3 - Secular Historical Background	13
4 - Mordecai & Esther	17
5 - Where Is God?	21
6 - The King Gives A Banquet	27
7 - Persian Military Planning	33
8 - Vashti Is Summoned	37
9 - Vashti Deposed	41
10 - No Queen? What Are We To Do?	47
11 - Introducing Mordecai & Esther	53
12 - The Search for A Queen	59
13 - What About Mordecai?	63
14 - Esther Goes Into the King	67
15 - Mordecai Saves the King	71
16 - Haman the Agagite	75
17 - Mordecai Refuses to Bow	81

The Presence of God – Commentary on Esther

18 - Haman's Plan	85
19 - The King Approves the Plan	89
20 - God Is A Saving God	95
21 - They Make A Plan	99
22 - Esther's Banquet	109
23 - Mordecai Shall Hang	113
24 - A Coincidence?	117
25 - Haman Specifies the Reward	121
26 - Mordecai's Reward	125
27 - Haman's Family	129
28 - The Truth Revealed	131
29 - Haman Executed	137
30 - Saving the Jews	147
31 - The Israelites Fight Back	147
32 - God Victorious	155
33 - The Prolog	159
34 - Why Isn't God Mentioned?	163
35 - The True Presence of God	165

Letters were sent by
couriers to all the king's
provinces to destroy, to kill
and to annihilate all the
Jews, both young and old,
women and children, in one
day... ~ Esther 3:13a

■ NOTES

INTRODUCTION

The book of Esther is a vitally important part of the body of Holy Scripture. Just as much as Deuteronomy, the Psalms, or Isaiah, it is inspired, inerrant, historically accurate, canonical, divinely authoritative, and theologically significant. To be sure, this is difficult for some Christians to understand, because the book contains no mention of God or religious activities and because it seems to focus on the mere physical survival of Jews at the expense of their Gentile enemies. – John C. Whitcomb, Esther, Triumph of God's Sovereignty, 1979, page 12

Esther is a book about the presence of God. This may seem like a strange statement, since God isn't mentioned anywhere in this book. In fact, prayer, worship, the temple, the Levitical law... there is nothing religious... there is nothing about God anywhere in the book of Esther. This led Martin Luther to say that this book was of “very doubtful value.” But, in this case Luther not only missed the mark... he wasn't even on the right archery range.

God is never mentioned. Doesn't that make you wonder... why?

If you don't have the answer to that question, you won't understand this book.

So, why isn't God mentioned even once in this book? Why does God appear to be absent... missing without leave so to speak? We'll answer that question, and others, as we learn about this incredible book.

It's like a Hollywood Blockbuster

This is an interesting book, and an important book. It includes significant historical detail, demonstrating it is a true and accurate story. It is also a comforting story of God's sovereignty and trustworthiness. It demonstrates that God will keep His promises, no matter what.

In many respects Esther is like a Hollywood film about royal court intrigue, a secret identity, political maneuvering, and life and death decisions. It's also a story in which the survival of mankind hangs in the balance... for real.

You've seen movies like that. An evil villain has found a way to destroy the world, and unless the hero can defeat them, all of humanity will be wiped out. As you get closer to the end of the movie it looks like the villain will prevail... evil will triumph. Then, through an extraordinary effort, the hero manages to save the world just in the nick of time.

Those stories are fiction. Esther is a true story... and the fate of all of humanity truly did hang in the balance. Just when it seemed all hope was lost, and humanity was doomed, the hero of the story brings all the pieces of the puzzle together, defeats the villain, and saves mankind from destruction. Whew! That was close.

Some have said that reading Esther is like watching a chess match between God and Satan. Move and

counter move... long pauses while Satan plans his next move... then finally Satan makes a decisive move... and God's king has been checked. It looks like Satan is about to win and there is no hope. The game is just about over. Then God moves... and out of nowhere... but obviously well-planned... it's checkmate... Satan loses. Mankind is saved.

So if you are ready, let's get started and jump into the exciting story of Esther.

The Presence of God – Commentary on Esther

WHAT'S THE STORY?

CHAPTER 1 WHAT'S THE STORY?

Esther, is the story of God's presence and God's trustworthiness and God's salvation. God is never mentioned in Esther, but His presence is seen in a powerful way throughout this book.

Do you know the story?

It takes place in a setting similar to Daniel, about 75 years after the Babylonian Empire fell to the Medo-Persians. So it is really not that long after the final events in the book of Daniel.

The Medo-Persians had conquered Babylon, and then the Persians had come to dominate the Medo-Persian Empire. So the empire was now just the Persian Empire. The story takes place in one of the capitals of the Persian Empire, Susa.

Bible time-wise, the Babylonian captivity had ended and over 50,000 Jews had returned to Jerusalem. They had rebuilt and dedicated the temple. So some of

God's people were back in their land, although they were still under Persian rule.

Back in Susa a young Jewish woman, Esther, was living with her cousin Mordecai, who was caring for her like a daughter.

One day the Persian King Ahasuerus... that's his Persian name... he is better known to us by his Greek name, Xerxes. One day he became angry with his queen. Her name was Vashti. He was so angry that he deposed her... meaning he fired her as queen. What was the problem? She refused to come to a drunken party the king was hosting, so the king got rid of her. You're fired! And she was no longer queen. A few years later he searches for a new queen and picks Esther... a Jew. But the king doesn't know she is a Jew. And even after she becomes queen she keeps her true identity a secret. No one, not even the king, knows she is a Jew.

Esther had been raised by Mordecai, her cousin, just as if she was his daughter. He is apparently intelligent, shrewd, and we'll see him rise up high in the ranks of the Persian government.

The third main character in this drama is Haman. Watch out for him, he's the evil villain.

Haman is the king's prime minister, meaning Haman was second only to the king. He was the guy with the real power. As you'll see it appears that following Ahasuerus' defeat by the Greeks – remember the 300 Spartans? That was Xerxes they were fighting against. – after his defeat Ahasuerus seems to have lost much of his interest in governing. Haman could talk him into approving just about whatever he wanted.

Mordecai apparently had a government position that brought him into regular contact with Haman, but Mordecai refused to bow down to him. This insolence

WHAT'S THE STORY?

makes Haman angry. When he learns that Mordecai is a Jew he gets the king to agree to a law that commands the people in the Persian Empire to kill all the Jews and take everything they owned.

At that time it is likely that all of the Jews lived somewhere within the Persian Empire. And since this is shortly after the Babylonian captivity, most likely the entire remnant of the Davidic line was within the Persian Empire. That means the Davidic line will be wiped out! 100% gone. None will be left. And, keep in mind, once a Persian king issues an edict or law, it cannot be revoked or changed. The end has come for the Jews.

Now think about this. If all of David's descendants are wiped out, what does that mean? There can be no Messiah. The Messiah has to come from the Jews, from the line of David. If there are no Jews... or if at a minimum none of David's descendants are left, there will be no Messiah... no Savior... and mankind is doomed. It looks like Satan may have a winning plan.

BUT... since Mordecai's cousin Esther is now queen, maybe she can do something to help. Maybe there is some way out of this. But there's a problem, she'll first need to speak to the king. And that could be a big problem. The bad news just keeps coming.

You see, if anyone approaches the king without permission, they will be killed... and that includes the queen. Persian kings may not be disturbed with unexpected visitors. So anyone who enters the throne room will be killed, unless the king has mercy and raises his scepter to them.

Esther has no choice. She is the only chance her people have. To save her people... the Jews... and to

save herself... she must talk to the king. So she fasts for three days... then enters the throne room... the king sees her... and he raises his scepter to her. She will live!

Over the course of two days Haman's plan is revealed to the king, and Ahasuerus realizes he has been tricked. He has Haman executed; Mordecai becomes the new prime minister; the Jews are saved; and any the possibility of a future Agagite threat to Israel is ended.

Obviously I've left out a lot of details... why does Haman hate the Jews so much? Why was Queen Esther afraid that the king might not raise his scepter to her? After all, she's the queen. And what happened to queen Vashti? Did she just disappear? No, she didn't. She was still living in the palace and seeking revenge. And by the way, how was a law that cannot be changed or revoked dealt with in order to save the Jews?

We've got lots of questions, and we'll answer them all as we read the book of Esther.

CHAPTER 2 FACT OR FICTION

An Important Question

My first question is: how do we know the book of Esther is true? It's a fantastic story, more like a movie plot than real life. Isn't it likely someone made up this story? How do those who claim this book is not an accurate history support their claims? The #1 reason they give is that God is not mentioned.

So we're right back to that big question: why isn't God mentioned in this book? How can a book of the Bible not mention God? How can all of the fantastic things that happen in Esther be true, if God is not a part of the story? This has to be a made-up story.

On the other hand, others say that Esther is so grounded in historical fact that there is no doubt it is a true story and that it should be part of scripture.

Remember God is sovereign. If God wanted to be mentioned, He could have moved the author of Esther to write about Him. That God is not mentioned seems to be a problem we humans have. For God it's no big

deal... or I should say it is a BIG deal. Why? Because God not specifically being mentioned is an actually important part of the story.

Another way this book is attacked by skeptics is by attacking the main characters. For example, Queen Esther and Mordecai are not mentioned in the Persian government records we've found. But, of course, that does not mean they were not real people. It just means we do not have all of the Persian records from 2,500 years ago.

Basically the attacks on Esther are few and weak. It is a book that is more often ignored than it is attacked.

Why is it ignored? Because most people don't understand the message in Esther. They don't understand what God is saying. They see it as just a nice story about a beautiful woman who becomes the queen of Persia. Or it's seen as nothing more than a story to explain the origin of the Jewish Purim festival.

But that's not what Esther is about. It is a powerful and encouraging story about God... it is all about God... He is the hero of this story

There is one other important fact concerning the historical accuracy of this book. Keep in mind that this book provides the basis for a major Jewish festival, Purim. Historically, the book of Esther was written at about the same time the Purim festival was established shortly after the events described in Esther took place. People living at that time would have immediately revealed this book as a fraud, if what it records was not accurate.

In addition, this book is detailed and includes facts that only someone living at that time would know. With this type of solid background, Esther firmly

FACT OR FICTION?

stands as being historically true... and having a rightful place in the canon of scripture. .

Who Was The Author?

Who wrote the book of Esther? Well... that's a mystery. The author doesn't identify themselves. But, whoever it was, they had a detailed knowledge of Persian customs, Persian etiquette, Persian laws, and Persian history. In particular because of all the detail, this book had to have been written by someone with access to the royal court of Ahasuerus.

But, the author was probably not Persian because they also have an intimate knowledge of the Hebrew calendar and customs, and the story is told from the perspective of someone with a strong sense of Jewish nationalism.

We also know that, based on the style of writing and word usage, the author was educated and well informed, and most likely was a member of the royal court. Two possibilities are Ezra or Nehemiah, or maybe it was written by Mordecai. But, the truth is we don't know who wrote this book.

CHAPTER 3 SECULAR HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

How does this book fit into history? Let's start with secular history. What was going on in the Persian Empire at this time, and who was Xerxes? BTW, for now I'm going to use his Greek name, Xerxes. That is how we best know him.

The Persian Empire reached its apex under Xerxes' father, Darius the First, and Xerxes maintained that prominence. But, Darius was not able to fully conquer Greece, and Xerxes wanted to avenge his father's defeat by capturing all of Greece.

The Persians had an interesting way to plan their military campaigns. They did it as a part of massive drunken parties that might last, on and off, for up to a year. It was at one of these parties, most likely one that was a part of the planning process for the invasion of Greece, that Queen Vashti refused Xerxes' order to make an appearance. And so Xerxes removed her as queen.

Some historians think Xerxes had her killed, and that would have been the normal practice. In those

days the way someone was “fired” from the royal court was to be killed. But, in this case that is not supported by the Persian records... although Xerxes may have eventually wished he had killed her. It appears Xerxes still had a place in his heart for Vashti, so he let her live and he may have even somewhat continued the relationship. But, the former queen did not just sit around quietly. She was looking for opportunities for revenge. And that's part of the story.

So Xerxes wanted to make Greece a part of his empire. He assembled a huge army and navy to attack Greece. He is the Persian king, and this is the Persian army, that fought against the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae... at least in the movie. Historically there was a battle at Thermopylae, but there were over 7,000 Greek soldiers there. The story of the 300 Spartans comes from a final last stand made by about 1,400 Greek soldiers, including a group of 300 Spartans, while the bulk of the Greek army escaped.

BTW, this attack on Greece by Xerxes killed many Greeks. It was this failed attempt to conquer Greece that drove Alexander the Great, with a passion, to conquer Persia. He wanted revenge on Persia. And he got it.

But, this story isn't about Greece... it's about Persia and King Xerxes...

The Persian kings and leading generals brought their wives and families with them whenever they went into battle, traveling in great luxury. But history shows that Xerxes was alone on this campaign. Why? Because, just before he left on this campaign he had deposed queen Vashti... he no longer had a queen. There was no one to keep him company on his quest to conquer Greece.

SECULAR HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Well, Xerxes was not able to conquer Greece, and he had to return to his capital of Susa where he had seemed to have turned his focus on finding a new queen. For example, he pursued the wife of one of his top officials. When he was rejected by her, he went after her daughter and was successful with her. But, as we'll see, that did not turn out well.

So it was suggested to him that he find a new queen from outside the royal family. And that brings us to the story of Esther and how she became the queen of the greatest empire on earth at that time... the Queen of the Persian Empire.

That's the secular story. But what was going on in biblical history at this time?

CHAPTER 4 MORDECAI & ESTHER

This story takes place after the Babylonian captivity and the return of the first group of Jews to Jerusalem. About 50 years before the events in Esther took place, 50,000 Jews were led by the Holy Spirit to return to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua the priest.

When they arrived in Jerusalem they set up the altar of sacrifice and then began to rebuild the temple. And, this is important... Jerusalem once again became the center of God's redemptive plan for the whole world. At this point the focus returns to Jerusalem.

Many Godly Jews, such as Daniel, could not return to Jerusalem. But, their hearts were there. So there were still Jews living in Persia who loved God. Some, such as Ezra and Nehemiah, would eventually return to Jerusalem. Others, such as Daniel, would live out their lives in Persia.

The story told in Esther starts about 32 years after the temple in Jerusalem was completed and dedicated, as described in Ezra chapter six. And it is a very

different story than that of the people who returned to Jerusalem, such as Nehemiah, Zerubbabel, Joshua, and Ezra. This is the key to the mystery of why God is not mentioned.

As we study this book, notice it is largely a secular story with the focus on the physical survival of the Jews... the survival of national Israel. That's important. Daniel's focus was on God and praying for Jerusalem. We don't see that type of devotion to God in this book.

As the story progresses we'll see that the human heroes of the story, Mordecai and Esther, do not seem to be concerned for Jerusalem, the temple, worship, prayer, or the laws of God. They are completely secular in their words and actions. They show no desire to bring about, or support God's plans involving Jerusalem and the temple. They show no interest for any of the foundations of Jewish religious life such as offering the required sacrifices through the priests in the temple, worshipping in the temple, or even simply praying to God. It appears they were happy and content with their lives in Persia, living a Persian lifestyle.

Compare this with Daniel. He lived in basically the same circumstances as Esther and Mordecai. But his attitude was very different from theirs. He was a man dedicated to obeying God. He prayed three times a day facing Jerusalem. He prayed with passion for the Jews to return to Jerusalem. And he refused to do anything offensive to God, such as eating food that had been dedicated to the Babylonian gods.

We don't see any of this passion for God, for obeying God, or for Jerusalem in either Mordecai or Esther. They are two people who, although they do

BIBLICAL HISTORY

have a good moral character, are very different from Daniel.

Also, from everything we know, Esther wanted to be Xerxes' wife. She was not forced into his harem against her will.

In order to become the queen Esther concealed her Jewish identity. What does this mean? While in the king's harem she had to act thoroughly Persian. She ate non-kosher food. She dressed like a Persian. She lived like a Persian. She worshipped like a Persian. And this had to continue after she became the queen.

Xerxes practiced the official religion of Persia, Zoroastrianism. So Esther had to also have practiced Zoroastrianism, or at least she went through the motions. Otherwise her real identity would be revealed.

As we'll see, no one knew, or even suspected she was Jewish. Her behavior was thoroughly Persian. Her actions in worship were thoroughly Zoroastrian. Even the king did not know his queen was Jewish.

Does this sound anything like Daniel? Not at all. Daniel remained Jewish in all respects. Esther's Jewishness was just a fact of birth... there was apparently little concern for scripture or the God ordained practices of Judaism.

What about Mordecai?

While his Jewish ancestry was not a secret, Mordecai did not do anything that would make him stand out as a Jew. And, what is particularly telling is that he commanded Esther to conceal her Jewish identity. No godly Jew would have commanded another Jew to conceal their Jewish identity. Can you imagine Daniel telling Shadrach, Meshach or

Abednego to hide the fact they were Jewish, so they could have a better life in Babylon? No, it would never happen. But, that's what Mordecai did.

Some say we should take notice that Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, just like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to worship the statue of Nebuchadnezzar.

But, this is an apples to oranges comparison. Did Daniel ever refuse to give Nebuchadnezzar the honor and respect accorded to the king? No.

Was Haman expecting Mordecai to bow down to him as an act of worship, or as an act of honor and respect for the position he held? We'll see that it was the latter... it was an act to honor the position he held. We'll talk more about this later. It's a bigger story than what we can talk about right now... there is a 500 year history of animosity between Haman and Mordecai... and Mordecai's reasons for not bowing down were not religious.

CHAPTER 5
WHERE IS GOD?

It is one of two books in the Bible in which the name of God is not mentioned. The ruler who is featured in the book, is mentioned 175 times; God is never mentioned. And yet to any reader of the book who reads with understanding, God is the main character in the book. God is putting Himself on display in amazing ways, even though He is unnamed. – John MacArthur, Esther: For Such A Time As This (sermon), www.gty.org/resources/sermons/80-392/esther-for-such-a-time-as-this

So, here's the really big question: why is God's presence not mentioned anywhere in this book?

It is not because God's presence was not there, or because God's presence was vague or uncertain. We'll see God is present, powerful, and very active in this book.

And it is not because this is a secular story. The heroes of this book were Jewish... although both were

only Jewish by birth and they apparently did not actually live like Jews.

The most likely reason God is not mentioned is that Mordecai, Esther, and probably most of the Jews of Susa... were both outside the Promised Land AND they had no thought for, nor concern about God's theocratic program centered on Jerusalem.

Their concern was for the nation, but not for God. God was not a part of their lives. They were thoroughly Persian—Jewish in name only.

This is nothing new. We see this in both Christians and Jews today. Most people who call themselves Christians are Christian in name only. When they stand before Jesus expecting a reward, they will hear Him say, “*I never knew you.*” (Matthew 7:21-23) They call themselves Christian, but have little or no desire to actually obey Jesus.

These “false” Christians give little thought to God during their daily lives. They follow the ways of the world instead of the ways of God. And they happily go through what Jesus calls the wide gate to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14).

We also see this today in national pride. People care more about their country than they do about God.

A huge percentage my friends are Christians, and I'd say the majority of them are very passionate about... politics. I hear more about conservative vs. progressive beliefs, than I hear about the Bible. They are putting their faith, or at least a large portion of their time, into thinking about politics instead of God.

Today's Israel is a nation of Jews, and they are willing to suffer and even die to save their country. But for many of them God is not a part of their lives. As with Mordecai and Esther, they are Jews by birth only.

WHERE IS GOD?

People are people. We do not change until God gives us a new heart. Until then we focus on human-based desires, and are focused on God in name only.

And that's the picture of the human heroes of the book of Esther. They are Jewish in name only. The reality is that they are thoroughly Persian, to the point that few people knew they were Jewish. But, they were still loyal to the nation of Israel and willing to give their lives for their nation

Can God work through those who are Jewish in name only? Can God work through those who will die for their country, but not for their God? Of course He can.

Think of Jews such as Saul, Ahaz, Zedekiah, and even some of the evil rulers of the northern kingdom such as Ahab and Jehoram. They were not godly leaders, yet God worked through them to accomplish His purposes.

Offensive to Persians

Some commentators have suggested that God isn't mentioned in Esther because to do so would have been offensive to Persian officials. Therefore, the author of Esther avoided talking about God.

This takes a very low view of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Did Daniel hide his Jewishness out of fear of offending Nebuchadnezzar? No! Daniel was thoroughly Jewish. And what happened in his relationship with the Persian king? Nebuchadnezzar was saved.

So when we put this all together, we have a very interesting picture...

In this story you will see the undeniable providence of God as He protects His people. This, combined with the complete omission of His name, points to the tragedy and the hope of Israel today.

The tragedy is that Israel today is completely unregenerate. It is very hard ground for the gospel. They are also cut off from meeting the Old Testament requirements because there is no temple. Israel has been cut off from God.

Here's an interesting question: Why do the Muslims occupy the Temple Mount? Is this a good thing? Is this what God desires? Yes, of course it is. It's God's will. It totally prevents Israel from re-establishing the temple and sacrificial system. God is using Islam. God is in control... always.

The nation of Israel today is lost... separated from Jesus... and separated from the Old Testament sacrifices. As scripture says, Israel is a branch that has been broken off.

That is the tragedy of Israel today. But, think about this: the book of Esther is a divine message of hope for Israel today. Even in her unsaved condition, cut off through her unbelief, Israel has not been forgotten by God.

*Behold, He who keeps Israel
Will neither slumber nor sleep. – Psalm 121:4*

But it is also true that, if they do not continue in their unbelief, God will graft Israel in again.

And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. - Romans 11:23

WHERE IS GOD?

We see that happening during the tribulation in Revelation. One-third of the Jews will turn to Jesus Christ as their savior. So Esther is a message of hope. And it is a message of hope today not only for Israel, but for us.

What we're talking about are God's promises, and how we can trust God's promises. In Esther we see that God NEVER forgets His promises... never. No matter what the circumstances. He never backs out on His promises. NEVER. We can 100% trust Him.

And He will use whomever He pleases to accomplish His purposes, even totally unregenerate Jews. He will use Jews like Esther and Mordecai who had become thoroughly worldly. He will use secular Jews, fanatical Muslims, and humanistic atheists, as well as false Christians and true believers to accomplish His purposes. God uses whomever He wishes to bring about His will on earth.

Esther is a divine message to the world today. It is a story of divine providence. Even when the world rejects God... God does not reject us.

It is also a story of tragedy. God was forgotten by His people. That's why God is not mentioned in Esther. His people in Persia no longer honor God. They no longer desire that God's will be done. They do not turn to Him and trust Him as Daniel did.

Yet Esther is also a story of hope. His people have forgotten Him, but God never forgets His people. God never forgets Israel. God will never forget us either. He never leaves us. We always have the presence of God with us, and He is always in control... as we'll see as we turn to chapter one in the book of Esther.

CHAPTER 6 THE KING GIVES A BANQUET

Esther tells a dramatic story in which the fate of the human race hangs in the balance. Literally all of humanity faced destruction, unless the hero of the story can defeat the evil villain and pull out a victory at the last minute.

And who is the hero of this story? His name is never mentioned, but His presence is seen... it is God.

So let's get started. The story begins in the year 483 BC, but let's step back to a time 55 years before that.

When Cyrus conquered Babylon and gave the Jews the right to return to Jerusalem, 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem. But, keep in mind Jerusalem is still a part of the Persian Empire. They are not free, but they are home. And with that return God's focus has shifted from Babylon back to Jerusalem.

By the year 483 BC the temple has been rebuilt and dedicated, and the sacrifices can resume. BUT... there is trouble brewing in the east. Back in the capital city of the Persian Empire, Susa, the beginnings of a

problem are starting to surface. A plan that was 500 years in the making, is starting to come together.

Esther Chapter 1

1 - Now it took place in the days of Abasuerus [aka. Xerxes], the Abasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces,

2 - in those days as King Abasuerus sat on his royal throne which was at the citadel in Susa,

3 - in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army officers of Persia and Media, the nobles and the princes of his provinces being in his presence.

4- And he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days.

What is the impression you get from these opening verses? Is the Persian Empire small and weak... or big and strong... or huge and powerful?

This is the picture of a huge and powerful empire. It stretched from the Indus River in present-day Pakistan, and it extends all the way to Ethiopia, which was North Eastern Africa. This is a huge and powerful empire.

It had 127 provinces, and a royal citadel in the capital city of Susa where *King Abasuerus* sat on his royal throne.

King Abasuerus -- that was his Hebrew name used throughout scripture. So I'll switch now and use his Hebrew name.

THE KING GIVES A BANQUET

Notice in verse 3 he is giving a banquet for quite a few people and... verse four... he spends 180 days showing them his royal glory and splendor.

180 days? That's six months. Doesn't that seem a bit excessive? When I first read this book years ago it struck me as being unusual. Sure, Ahasuerus had a lot of stuff. But, showing off his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for 180 days... how can it take six months?

I'm thinking this should have taken a couple of weeks, or a month at most. But, it took six months. Why was Ahasuerus doing this? And why did it take so long?

We'll find the answers by answering another question. Why had Ahasuerus brought all of these people together in Susa? Just to show off and to have a banquet? Even back then, with the incredible wealth Ahasuerus had, he would not waste money on such a huge event without a purpose.

He takes all of the major government leaders, as well as all the military leaders, away from their normal duties, just to show off for six months? That doesn't make sense. There had to be a purpose that would benefit the empire.

Ahasuerus has called together his top government officials and military leaders, and is having them spend half a year looking at his stuff. Why? Because he was planning something big.

Ahasuerus' father Darius had invaded Greece and was defeated. This was humiliating! And Ahasuerus was looking for revenge. He wanted to conquer all of Greece. But, he was no fool. He knew it would not be easy. The Greeks were no push-overs.

What we have in these opening verses of Esther is the planning session for the conquest of Greece. Ahasuerus (Xerxes) has brought together everyone needed to plan a major military campaign... his princes and attendants, the army officers of Persia and Media, and the nobles and the princes of his provinces. They are all there. And what does planning involve?

He shows off his wealth. He shows off his royal glory. He shows off his military technology. What he is doing is showing them the men, ships, horses, and military technology, weapons and equipment that can be used as part of a major military campaign.

I imagine they may have also observed the army training and drilling, and possibly even going through a mock battle. For six months they are seeing everything they need to see in order to:

1. Know the wealth, and strength, and power of Persia, so they'll know they cannot be defeated.
2. Have detailed knowledge about the military capabilities of the Empire. They'll need that knowledge to plan the military campaign. You need to thoroughly know, and understand the capabilities of your military assets, if you are to have a successful plan.

Notice there are two banquets mentioned in scripture. The first is in verse three. Ahasuerus gave a banquet and his guests spent 180 days learning about the resources of the empire. But, how do we know they were planning a military campaign?

THE KING GIVES A BANQUET

The Persians planned their military campaigns doing long drunken banquets. That's what was apparently going on for six months. Even if they did some planning while sober, they'd confirm those plans while drunk. It doesn't seem like a good way to plan a military campaign, but that's how they did it.

But, the Persians also held a once-a-year annual banquet. Maybe this was that annual banquet.

Scriptures does not give us the purpose of this first banquet, but it fits with how historical records describe Persian military planning. An annual banquet would not involve 180 days looking at the royal glory and splendor. This first banquet appears to be a planning banquet, not the once-a-year banquet. However, there is a good chance that the second banquet, described beginning in verse 5, was a combination banquet. It may have celebrated the end of the military planning as well as being the annual banquet.

Another question: why do we think this was the planning session for the campaign against Greece?

Because this is the third year of the reign of Ahasuerus... it is the year 483 BC. He began to reign in 486.

Ahasuerus invades Greece in 480. The Persian records say it took four years to prepare for the invasion. So Ahasuerus started assembling the resources in 484, and the planning took place in 483 and 482. It then takes a good part of two years to train the army and build the needed equipment. They then assemble the invasion force and get them to Greece. The actual invasion starts in 480.

Everything fits perfectly for this to be the planning sessions for the invasion of Greece.

BTW, what was the result of this planning? Since the planning was done during drunken banquets, you'd expect a disaster. But no, Ahasuerus' campaign against the Greeks is recognized as one of the best planned military campaigns in all of history. He had the resources, he had a huge army – the Greeks were vastly outnumbered... and he had an excellent plan... yet he lost.

Why?

Well, stuff happened. The Persian army should have been unstoppable. But in their crossing of the Dardanelles (Hellspport), stuff happened. In conducting the campaign in Greece, stuff happened. For example, a major storm destroyed the massive Persian navy, and things went downhill from there. The Persians seemed to have a lot of bad luck.

Stuff happened? Bad luck? No. God was involved, as we'll see throughout the story of Ether.

CHAPTER 7
PERSIAN MILITARY PLANNING

5 - *When these days were completed, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present at the citadel in Susa, from the greatest to the least, in the court of the garden of the king's palace.*

6 - *There were hangings of fine white and violet linen held by cords of fine purple linen on silver rings and marble columns, and couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones.*

7 - *Drinks were served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful according to the king's bounty.*

8 - *The drinking was done according to the law, there was no compulsion, for so the king had given orders to each official of his household that he should do according to the desires of each person.*

9 - *Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace which belonged to King Abasuerus.*

There is some interesting information here.

Notice how lavish the banquet is. White and violet are the royal colors. The couches were covered in gold and silver cloth. And the floor was a beautiful mosaic of inlaid stones and jewels. Drinking was done from golden vessels of various kinds. Using a variety of expensive drinking cups and drinking vessels was a Persian way of showing great wealth.

So there is a display a great wealth... overwhelming wealth beyond your imagination. Who could oppose such wealth? Surely the gods were smiling on Ahasuerus to give him such wealth.

Then notice that *The drinking was done according to the law, there was no compulsion, for so the king had given orders to each official of his household that he should do according to the desires of each person.*

Usually the king would pledge his guests to drink a certain amount of wine. But, in this case, they were free to drink as much or as little as they pleased. We have no information outside of scripture about what happened at this specific banquet. But, it is interesting to note that... in this case... for this banquet... drinking was not required. On the other hand the king was about to get really drunk.

Also, notice that Queen Vashti's banquet is mentioned. But, as with the men's banquet, no details are given, other than that it was for the women who were currently staying in the palace.

Vashti's Greek name is Amestris, and that is the name commonly used in most historical records. She was the mother of Artaxerxes, who will become king

PERSIAN MILITARY PLANNING

when his father is assassinated. Some historians say she may have been pregnant with Artaxerxes during the time of this banquet. The timing would be about right.

And remember the wives, part of their families, and a large personal entourage accompanied the leaders on military campaigns... and they traveled in great luxury. That means the wives had a lot of planning and preparation to do, and the Queen was in charge of that side of the military campaign.

BTW, the queen usually ate at the king's table. In Persia the women ate with the men. Even for banquets the men and women normally ate together. But these were not normal banquets. This was a military planning banquet, and that called for the men to be separate from the women

However, in both cases the banquets were large, opulent, generous, and magnificent.

Now the story gets interesting. It's the last day of this great seven-day feast. The king is drunk... and the Queen is with the prominent women of the empire hosting her own banquet.

CHAPTER 8
VASHTI IS SUMMONED

10 - *On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus,*

11 - *to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful.*

12 - *But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him.*

The king sends the seven eunuchs to bring Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, to his drunken banquet to be put on a display. Notice she was being summoned by the king to “*display her beauty.*”

But Queen Vashti refused to come. We don't know why she refused. Scripture says nothing about her reasons. While we really want to know, God has

determined that we don't need to know and He doesn't tell us. [I suggest skipping the remainder of this chapter as the following is purely speculation.]

Why Did Vashti Refuse To Come?

How is the Queen going to feel about the king's command? Remember, she is hosting a banquet for the leading women of the empire. The king sends seven eunuchs to fetch her to display her beauty before a crowd of drunken men. That is a huge insult. It is treating his queen as though she were a lowly harem girl... and doing that in front of the leading women of the empire. That's not good.

And why does he want her? Not to honor her. It seems more likely that he wants to demonstrate his power over this beautiful and probably very intelligent woman. He wants her to wear her crown, the symbol of her position and power. And wearing her crown, he wants her to put her beauty on display in front of a crowd of drunken men. She's being treated as an object, not a queen. This is incredibly humiliating.

The Queen, who is managing part of the planning process for the greatest invasion force the world had ever seen – she's probably handling all of the logistics and planning for bringing the households of the leading military commanders on the campaign, so that they traveled and lived in luxury – and she was being treated as a harem girl.

That was not acceptable. Her answer... the only answer she could give and maintain her respect and authority... was *“No, I won't come.”*

VASHTI IS SUMMONED

The king had made a huge mistake. Vashti gave the only reasonable answer she could give and the king was now in a difficult spot.

Remember, Persian kings were perfect. They never made a mistake. That's why a Persian law, made by the king, could not be revoked. It would mean admitting the king had made a mistake. That can never happen. So what was he to do about Vashti? The normal procedure would have been to have her killed.

But, it seems the king did not want to get rid of Vashti. He may have truly loved her, or he may have appreciated her intellectual and management abilities, or it could be that he was afraid of her. Whatever the reason, he does not want to not have her killed, and he now has a truly huge problem.

CHAPTER 9 VASHTI DEPOSED

The king didn't know what to do. So he called on his wise men.

13 - Then the king said to the wise men who understood the times—for it was the custom of the king so to speak before all who knew law and justice

14 - and were close to him: Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media who had access to the king's presence and sat in the first place in the kingdom—

These were his top advisors. They knew the details of Persian law, so they knew what could legally be done. They also understood the culture. They knew what was going on in the empire, the mood of the people, and how people would react. These were the king's top advisors... the very best. They were probably magi, and may have been similar to the group

Nebuchadnezzar called on to tell him his dream and then interpret it.

So the king presents the problem to these highly educated, and well-informed wise men:

15 - *“According to law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti, because she did not obey the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?”*

The king is upset... he is angry... he has been embarrassed in front of the leaders of his empire. Vashti has disobeyed a direct command of the king. What should he do? And the punishment has to be legal. It has to be done according to the law.

Before we go further, we need to understand that, although the details are interesting, this story is not about Vashti and why she disobeyed the king. Nor is it about the proper protocols and punishments when the queen disobeys the king. So the Bible doesn't tell us these things. This is about Esther becoming the Queen of Persia. The purpose of this part of the story is to give us the background so we understand how a Jewish woman became the legitimate queen of the Persian Empire. That's something that normally would be impossible. A Jew could never be the Queen of Persia.

What scripture tells us is that Ahasuerus wanted a legal way to handle the problem. No one can publicly disobey the king, not even the queen. To do so meant death. But the king does not appear to want to impose that penalty. He's looking for a legal alternative that will let Vashti live.

16 - *In the presence of the king and the princes, Memucan said, “Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but*

VASHTI DEPOSED

also all the princes and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Abasuerus.

17 - *For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women causing them to look with contempt on their husbands by saying, 'King Abasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in to his presence, but she did not come.'*

18 - *This day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's conduct will speak in the same way to all the king's princes, and there will be plenty of contempt and anger.*

19 - *If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by him and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti may no longer come into the presence of King Abasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she.*

20 - *When the king's edict which he will make is heard throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small."*

So the punishment was to fit the crime. Queen Vashti refused to come when the king commanded her to come, so she can never again officially come into the presence of the king. She is forever banished from his presence by an edict that cannot be changed.

However, this does not mean she left the palace. Based on historical records it appears she continued to live in the palace. It may even be that some of the officials in the palace continued to consider her to be the true queen. She was most likely involved in the

palace intrigue and political maneuvering that is about to take place.

21 - This word pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed.

22 - So he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province according to its script and to every people according to their language, that every man should be the master in his own house and the one who speaks in the language of his own people.

The Persian Empire had a very efficient postal system. We'll see the importance of this throughout the book of Esther.

In verse 22 letters are sent to all the king's provinces. The Persian postal system was so fast and efficient, the king, and his advisors, could be confident these letters would be quickly delivered before news of what had happened got out.

The ancient historian Herodotus of Halicarnassus – he lived 484-425 BC, so he was born during the time Ahasuerus was planning the invasion of Greece – said the following about the Persian postal system:

"Nothing mortal travels so fast as these Persian messengers. The entire plan is a Persian invention; and this is the method of it.

Along the whole line of road there are men (they say) stationed with horses, in number equal to the number of days which the journey takes, allowing a man and horse to each day; and these men will not be hindered from accomplishing at their best speed the distance which they

VASHTI DEPOSED

have to go, either by snow, rain, heat, or by the darkness of night.

The first rider delivers his dispatch to the second and the second passes it to the third; and so it is borne from hand to hand along the whole line, like the light in the torch-race, which the Greeks celebrate to Vulcan.”

It sounds like he is describing the Pony Express. Historians believe that there were stations, about 20 miles apart where riders changed horses. And, as Herodotus describes, the mail pouch was passed to a new rider every day.

Probably the biggest problem were the many different languages spoken in the Empire. So *letters were sent – verse 22 – to all the king’s provinces according to its script and to every people according to their language.* Before it could be sent, the letter had to be translated into all the different languages in the Persian Empire.

So the stage has been set... that's what Esther chapter 1 is all about. It gives us the background to help us understand what happens next. It is impossible for a Jewish woman to become the queen of Persia. Yet that is exactly what God is setting up.

But, it doesn't happen right away. It will be another five years before Esther becomes queen. During that time the king completes his preparations and goes off to war against Greece. All of his generals and nobles have their wives with them. But, Ahasuerus has no one...

CHAPTER 10
NO QUEEN? – WHAT ARE WE TO DO?

Esther Chapter 2

1 - After these things when the anger of King Ahasuerus had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.

Ahasuerus remembers his queen and he misses her. He also remembers what she had done, that she embarrassed him. But, his anger and embarrassment have passed. The problem is the decree. He remembers that also. The decree of a Persian king can never be revoked, so she can never (officially) come into his presence again.

It's impossible for Vashti to be queen again. I get the feeling that Ahasuerus is sad and heartbroken. He may be regretting what he has done.

So the king's attendants make a suggestion. He doesn't come up with this idea on his own. The answer comes from a very unlikely source.

2 - Then the king's attendants, who served him, said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king."

The attendants who serve him, make the suggestion. Doesn't that seem odd? Where are the wise men? Where are the king's advisors? Instead it's the attendants, his servants that come up with the answer. Again, since this is all scripture tells us, this is all we need to know. But, inquiring minds want to know more. So let's see what we can learn from other sources.

The Wooing Of A New Queen

This past week I was reading some older commentaries written in the 1800's. They all assume queen Vashti was killed. That would be the normal penalty for disobeying the king. But, documents unearthed in the 20th century record that she was alive and active. There is nothing in these records that indicates whether or not she is still the queen. But, what is in the records we have is consistent with something significant, related to Vashti, happening at about the same time the Bible reports that Esther became queen.

The historian Herodotus tells us that following Ahasuerus' return from the disaster in Greece, he turned his attention to making love instead of war. He records that Ahasuerus first fell in love with the wife of his brother Masistes. He was rejected by her.

He then turned his attention to other women, including Masistes' daughter – Artaynte – with whom he was successful. Since his harem was not lacking in beautiful women, some take this to have been his way

of searching for a new queen. Based on Persian tradition the king is supposed to select a queen from within the royal family... and those are the women he was approaching.

In any case, Ahasuerus promises Artaynte whatever she desired. She chose his coat of many colors.

It's just a coat... right? No. This was a special coat that Vashti had hand-woven for Ahasuerus after she had been removed as queen. Weaving a coat by hand was not something a queen normally would do... but Vashti did. Some historians say she did this in an effort to get back in Ahasuerus ' favor.

So it is a very special coat made by the hand of Vashti. And now... although he was reluctant to give it to her, Ahasuerus had to live up to his promise and give his young mistress this very special coat.

But watch out! Vashti was not a woman to be slighted. During the king's birthday celebration, there was a custom that allowed Vashti to ask for anything she wanted, and the king had to give it to her. She asked that Masistes' wife, the mother of Artaynte, be given to her. Then Vashti promptly had her mutilated in ways that are too gross to describe here.

As a result of this, Masistes attempted to flee to Bactria and raise a revolt against Ahasuerus. But the king's men chased after him, catching him and killing him before he reached his destination.

This is not the only act of revenge history records Vashti as being involved in. She is seen as taking revenge on other women in the king's household, and it is thought that she may have been behind the assassination attempts on the king. But the point is, Vashti is still around, and active. She's a smart, shrewd

and dangerous woman. You don't want to get on her bad side.

So now, based on Persian customs and traditions, Ahasuerus is supposed to select a new queen from among the families of the seven princes of Persia. His brother Masistes was the head of one of those families. That did not turn out well. Vashti had delivered a powerful message to the heads of those seven families: if you let anyone in your family be considered as a possibility for next queen, you will be sorry.

The king was bound by tradition. The princes, who certainly wanted to avoid any further risk of Vashti's vengeance, also had the problem of being bound by the same tradition. How could they get out of this fix?

Someone may have whispered a suggestion in the ear of an attendant. The attendant, who was not bound by tradition, could then suggest to the king that a new queen be found outside of the princely families. The king jumped on the idea, and of course, none of the royal families objected.

3 - Let the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom that they may gather every beautiful young virgin to the citadel of Susa, to the harem, into the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let their cosmetics be given them.

4 - Then let the young lady who pleases the king be queen in place of Vashti." And the matter pleased the king, and he did accordingly.

So the search is on.

NO QUEEN? – WHAT ARE WE TO DO?

I assume you've noticed that God has not been mentioned. But have you seen a plan unfolding?

Some unusual things have happened. For example, there is a banquet at which the king changed the rules so that no one is required to drink. Normally everyone is required to get drunk. This time that requirement has been set aside... and the king still gets stupid drunk.

Ahasuerus is not known as a stupid man. His military conquests are well planned, and except for Greece, they were successful. He was also known for vast building projects. Yet he gets drunk and does something stupid.

What about his well-planned campaign to conquer Greece? A storm sinking most of his naval fleet ultimately leads to his defeat. The hand of God maybe?

And there were other “things” that happened. For example, to get his army into Greece Ahasuerus had two bridges constructed. But, before the army could cross, they were destroyed by a storm, delaying the invasion and giving the Greeks more time to prepare. The hand of God again?

BTW... what did Ahasuerus do in response to this? He had his soldiers wade into the water and whip the water with chains to punish it.

What is also interesting is that Ahasuerus rebuilt the bridges and left them in place after his army had crossed. When he was retreating he tried to use those bridges to escape. But, once again, they had been destroyed by a storm. There was no escape. His army was trapped and was decimated by both disease and the Greeks.

I'm sure you've had a similar experience. You go out to invade another country, and everything just goes

wrong. No matter what you do... it goes wrong. Well Ahasuerus was having one of those types of invasions. Everything was going wrong.

He didn't know it, but he was doing the will of God. Everything was under control. God was in charge. What we see happening is that everything is lining up to create a situation in which Ahasuerus not only must find a new queen, but she must be someone from outside the royal family. God is in control...

CHAPTER 11

INTRODUCING MORDECAI & ESTHER

Sometimes it seems like our world is going crazy. Little of what's going on makes sense. People turning against Jesus and the Bible. At times it seems like we are on an unstoppable downward spiral. Just going down the drain.

Esther is the book that gives us hope. It's the book that lets us know that, no matter how crazy things seem to be, God is in charge. His will is going to be accomplished.

Esther is the story of God working through people who have largely abandoned God. God does not turn away from us because we live in a nation that has turned away from Him. God uses us... and He uses those who ignore him... and those who fight against Him... and those who deny He exists. God uses them all to accomplish His purposes.

And what's amazing is that they do it of their own free will. God is not a puppet master. He is a loving, gracious God who showers that love, grace and mercy on us.

And that's what the book of Esther is about. The main message of this book is a message of comfort and peace for us... knowing that God's will is being done in spite of all the craziness going on around us. God is sovereign, and nothing can prevent His will from being done.

BTW, this does not mean we can just sit back and spend all day on the couch watching football... or old movies... or whatever it is you enjoy watching on TV. That is not a lifestyle that reflects a love for God. If you are not putting your faith into action (James 2:14), scripture says you may not be saved.

We're now at verse five of chapter two, where we meet Esther and her cousin Mordecai:

5 - Now there was at the citadel in Susa a Jew whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite,

6 - who had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with the captives who had been exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had exiled.

7 - He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had no father or mother. Now the young lady was beautiful of form and face, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

Notice that Mordecai is identified as being “*at the citadel in Susa.*” This means he has some sort of government position. He's not just in Susa, which is the summer capital of the Persian Empire, he is at the

INTRODUCING MORDECAI & ESTHER

citadel. He works in the building that is the center of the Persian government.

Mordecai is a Jew, and there is nothing that indicates he kept this a secret. But, it also appears that he did not do anything that made it obvious he was a Jew. He was not advertising his Jewish heritage.

The name Mordecai sounds Jewish to our ears, but it is not historically a Jewish name. It comes from the name of the Babylonian god Marduk. Mordecai's family has been living in Babylon for three generations. They are probably thoroughly integrated into Babylonian and now Persian culture. So he has a Babylonian name.

However, it is interesting that he comes from a line of prominent Jews. Verse 5 states that he is the great grandson of Kish, a Benjamite who was exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah. Let's go to Jeremiah 24 to learn more about this:

1 - After Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away captive Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and the officials of Judah with the craftsmen and smiths from Jerusalem and had brought them to Babylon, the Lord showed me: behold, two baskets of figs set before the temple of the Lord!

2 - One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, and the other basket had very bad figs which could not be eaten due to rotteness.

3 - Then the Lord said to me, "What do you see, Jeremiah?" And I said, "Figs, the good figs, very good; and the bad figs, very bad, which cannot be eaten due to rotteness."

4 - *Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying,*

5 - *“Thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the captives of Judah, whom I have sent out of this place into the land of the Chaldeans.’”*

Are the Babylonians responsible for taking these people into captivity? Yes. But, look at what verse 5 says. God says that He sent them out of Jerusalem. God is in control, not the Babylonians.

This was a group of 10,000 of the leading citizens of Jerusalem. They were the *officials of Judah* and those who had useful skills, such as *the craftsmen and smiths*. The Babylonians took these people because they are the ones who could be leaders and become the nucleus of a rebellion. They are also the people whose abilities and skills would be useful in Babylon.

For example Ezekiel is in this group. Mordecai's ancestor Kish was also a part of this group. They are being deported to Babylon and are identified by God through Jeremiah as “good figs” in comparison with the “bad figs” who will be left behind.

BTW, who else was a Benjamite? The son of an earlier Kish? King Saul (1 Samuel 14:51). Let's file this information away for the future.

So Mordecai is Jewish. This was not commonly known, but it's not a secret. He probably lived a Persian lifestyle. There is no indication he was a practicing Jew, so few people knew he was a Jew. However, he comes from among the leading citizens of Jerusalem, as does Hadassah. They are cousins, having Kish as a common ancestor.

Hadassah also has a non-Hebrew name, Esther. About all we know about this name is that it was used

INTRODUCING MORDECAI & ESTHER

in both Babylonian and Persian cultures. However, what is important to note is that it is not a Hebrew name.

Since her mother and father had died, Mordecai raised Esther as though she were his own daughter.

CHAPTER 12
THE SEARCH FOR A QUEEN

8 - *When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women 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 - *She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants 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.*

Esther was about 26 when she became Queen, so she was probably around 24 when she went into Ahasuerus' harem.

There is nothing recorded that directly tells us how Esther felt about this. But there is also no evidence that she wanted to avoid becoming a concubine or even the queen of a pagan king. In fact, verse 9 seems to indicate she was making her best effort to please the king's eunuchs.

9 – *She pleased him and won his favor.*

The “him” who was pleased is Hegai, the eunuch who was in charge of the harem. The historian Josephus writes that in the search for a new queen 400 women were taken into the harem. This number may be an exaggeration, but most likely a lot of women were taken into the harem. These are the most beautiful young women from throughout the empire.

I watched a movie about Esther a couple of years ago. In the film Persian soldiers are going house-to-house dragging out beautiful woman who are prospects for becoming the next queen. Esther tries to hide, but she is discovered and is dragged away to the harem.

Think about this. The announcement has gone out: *Attention beautiful women... you could be the next queen of Persia. Apply here.* Do you think they needed to send soldiers out to kidnap young women? There were probably thousands wanting to get in on this chance to become the queen of the greatest empire on earth. This is better than being on American Idol, and look at how people line up for that.

SEARCH FOR A QUEEN

So, Esther is in the harem. She wins the favor of Hegai and is given seven attendants and the best place in harem. That didn't happen just because of her looks. There were a lot of beautiful women there. It had to have been her attitude; her intelligence; how she interacted with the other women; how she interacted with her attendants; as well as her getting along well with the eunuchs.

Verse nine says she was given the best place. That means she was identified by Hegai as being the one mostly likely to become queen.

BTW, Hegai is not some low-level servant. To be in charge of the king's harem was a high level position. A position in which Hegai had the ear of the king. They probably talked quite a lot.

Is this a picture of a woman who was there against her will? Is this a picture of someone who was not thoroughly Persian in every way? No.

Esther was there willingly and was doing her best to be selected as the queen. And she was living 100% as a Persian. She was eating, dressing, acting, and worshipping as a Persian. Ahasuerus' religion was Zoroastrianism, and she was thoroughly Zoroastrian in her worship. Otherwise she would not have made such a good impression on Hegai.

And what was it that scripture says she had to conceal? Her national identity and family background. How things are worded in scripture is important. Scripture says nothing about her practicing Jewish customs and needing to conceal what she was doing. Nothing is said about her praying to the creator God of the Bible and having to conceal those prayers.

Daniel prayed to "his God" three times a day. If Esther was a practicing Jew she would have been

praying to God, and she would have needed to conceal that. But, no mention is made of prayer being concealed. She only had to conceal her national identity and live as a Persian.

She was a young woman who was Jewish by birth, but thoroughly Persian in her lifestyle. We don't see God mentioned in this book because God had no part in Esther's life, nor in Mordecai's life.

She's worshiping the pagan Gods of Zoroastrianism and ignoring the God of the Bible. After all, revealing her Jewish nationality would bring to an end any possibility that she might be selected as the next Queen of Persia.

By Persian tradition the queen was supposed to come from one of seven princely Persian families. Ahasuerus was ignoring that tradition. But he could only go so far. To select a non-Persian was unthinkable.

CHAPTER 13

WHAT ABOUT MORDECAI?

What about Mordecai?

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.

We typically take this to mean Mordecai was worried about Esther, and concerned because she was taken unwillingly into the harem. But, is that what this says? No...

Another possibility is that Mordecai thought she had a good chance to become queen, and he wanted to be sure she was healthy and doing well in her preparations. Was she getting the right food? Were the cosmetics appropriate? Was she getting along well with the chief eunuch? Was there anything she needed?

We have nothing to help us know what Mordecai was thinking. All we can know from this verse is that Mordecai was concerned about Esther.

And notice he is walking near the courtyard of the harem. That's an important detail. This is not a place everyone has access to. The harem was very secluded and highly protected. Few could get near it, especially a man. So this is an indication Mordecai has a fairly high government position that gives him access to places others cannot go.

The next three verses tells us how the women were prepared to meet the king...

12 - Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Ahasuerus, 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 Shayash-gaz, 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.

The women first went through a treatment with oil of myrrh. Most of the Persian Empire was hot, dry desert. That was hard on the skin. In addition, baths were infrequent, and disease common. It was a very different world than the world we live in.

The oil of myrrh treatments were to address conditions such as sunburn, cracking, wrinkling, wind damage, and to heal sores and skin diseases. This

WHAT ABOUT MORDECAI?

healing could take a while, that's why the treatment took six months.

What about the cosmetics? We think of "cosmetics" as a coloring women apply. That was not the case here. They are not spending six months being painted with cosmetics. The Persians burned the cosmetics like incense is burned. The object was to saturate your hair and the pores of your skin with the fumes from the burning cosmetics. So these cosmetics were like perfume, but much longer lasting. They were used to help them smell good. That's why the phrase "perfumes and cosmetics" is used.

And that's why the "cosmetic" process took six months, and the overall process took a year.

At the end of the year each women, in turn, would have the opportunity to pick whatever she wanted from the clothes, jewelry, and other beauty enhancing items available in the harem, and then go in to the king.

After that they typically would become a concubine, waiting on the king's pleasure, if he even remembered them.

What was the life of a concubine like? Persian concubines raised their children until about age five. Many became entertainers, singers, dancers, and musicians. They provided the entertainment for the king and at banquets. However, life as a concubine was probably a lonely life. You were cut off from you're your family, and there was no hope of ever being married and having a family of your own to share your life with.

CHAPTER 14

ESTHER GOES INTO THE KING

Finally it was Esther's turn to go in to the king..

Esther Chapter 2

15 - *When the turn came for Esther (the young woman 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 favor of everyone who saw her.*

16 - *She was taken to King Ahasuerus in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.*

Based on human nature my guess is that most of the women focused on trying to be the most beautiful. But Esther appears to have taken a different route. She shows wisdom in following the advice of Hegai.

Hegai was the king's eunuch in charge of the harem. He probably had a very close relationship with the king. They probably talked quite a bit. And he knew what the king liked. BUT, more importantly, he probably knew Queen Vashti. And he knew what the king liked in Vashti. He had all the inside knowledge.

And remember, he had placed Esther in the best place in the harem. He favored Esther, and would probably want to do all he could to be sure Esther was the one selected as queen.

Beauty was important, but was the king going to select a new queen based on beauty alone? No. The queen had important duties, this was much more than a beauty contest.

And don't you think that the king would ask the eunuch in charge of the harem what he thought of each woman before that woman came to him? Of course he would. They probably discussed each prospect in detail. He's selecting a queen for the most powerful empire in the world. You can be sure the king knew everything about Esther that Hegai had learned in the past year.

Yes, the beauty treatments took a year, but you can bet the eunuchs were evaluating each woman during that year also... and reporting to the king. Esther had done the right thing by making a very favorable impression on Hegai.

Here is what 1 Peter 3 says about what women should do to be pleasing...

3 - Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses;

ESTHER GOES INTO THE KING

4 - but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.

Don't focus just on the external. That's good advice. Well of course it is, it's from scripture.

Esther had focused on the internal and had impressed Hegai. When she had the opportunity to focus on the external, choosing whatever adornments she wished, she continued to focus on the internal. She showed her common sense and wisdom – and I'm sure she was also being led by the Holy Spirit – by following Hegai's advice.

And she was right to do so. She not only won the favor of the king, but under God's amazing providence, she won the favor of everyone who saw her. Most likely the princes were involved in the selection process, as well as the king and his advisors. This was not a beauty contest. They were looking for a woman who was worthy to be queen.

A queen who was not acceptable to the princes and other high officials, would be nothing but a problem. But, Esther won the favor of all who saw her.

17 - The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found favor and kindness with him more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

18 - Then the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his princes and his servants; he also made a holiday for the provinces and gave gifts according to the king's bounty.

19 - *When the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.*

20 - *Esther had not yet made known her kindred or her people, even as Mordecai had commanded her; for Esther did what Mordecai told her as she had done when under his care.*

Esther has become the new queen. That she is Jewish has not been revealed. Her secret is safe. All she has to do is continue what she has been doing, living as a Persian woman, who is now the Queen of Persia.

Verse 19 talks about the virgins being gathered together the second time, but does not explain this. So we're not sure what it means. Some think this was done to show a comparison between Esther and all of the rest who had not been selected. But, that idea leaves out the concubines. They had gone into the king, and had not been selected. They were no longer virgins.

Another option is that these women were the ones who were returned home. This second gathering was like a final farewell before they returned home. A pool of prospective women had been brought together, some went into permanent service as concubines. But some had not been called, and had not become concubines. So they could go home.

But, the fact is we don't know the purpose of this second gathering, or even why it is called the "second" gathering.

Finally scripture notes that Esther had not made known her national identity. She is now the queen of the Persian Empire... and no one even suspects she is a Jew.

CHAPTER 15

MORDECAI SAVES THE KING

There is one more event we need to know about. It is going to become important later in the story. It's described at the end of chapter two:

21 - In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded the door, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Abasuerus.

22 - But the plot became known to Mordecai and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name.

23 - Now when the plot was investigated and found to be so, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence.

Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. The gate was where legal matters were settled. So this indicates that Mordecai may have been a judge or a magistrate.

That's a fairly high position and many commentators think he may have gotten this position through Queen Esther's influence.

And we should note that the gate is also the customary meeting place for high level Persian officials. So a lot of important things happen there, and there are a lot of people coming and going on official business.

Because Mordecai is in this position, and works at the king's gate, he is in a position to overhear a plot against the king. Do you think it was just luck... random chance... that he happened to be in just the right place at the right time? I don't think so. We're seeing God's hand again.

So the plot is discovered, reported to the king by Esther in Mordecai's name, and the plot is thwarted.

Notice that Esther reports this plot to the king. At this time she apparently has easy access to the king. After all they eat nearly all of their meals together, as is normal in Persia. So they see each other frequently.

Also notice that a report of this was written in the "*Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence.*" It was a normal Persian practice to record individual deeds of significant service to the Empire or king.

So now all of the pieces are in place. So far chapters 1 and 2 have been setting things up for the major action that is about to come. And we'll see that start in chapter three.

So far this story has been somewhat like a soap opera, with multiple love affairs, the drama of palace intrigue, and a royal struggle for power. As I mentioned in the first chapter, it is very much like a chess match between God and Satan... move and counter move. A pawn eliminated here... a rook taken off the board

MORDECAI SAVES THE KING

there. In the next chapter the game continues as Haman hatches his plot against the Jews, and the threat against all of humanity becomes real.

As the story continues we'll continue to see God's hand working in the lives of Ahasuerus, Haman, and Vashti, and of course Esther and Mordecai. Just as in a chess match, God is positioning everyone and everything for the coming big showdown.

The stage has been set. Everything that is needed is in place. God has shown us His preparations, revealing that what has happened, and what will happen, is all about Him. Even though His name is never mentioned, God is in control.

CHAPTER 16

HAMAN THE AGAGITE

The plot now thickens. Esther has been queen for more than four years. She still has not revealed her Jewish heritage. Everyone thinks she is Persian. It's also been four years since Mordecai discovered and revealed the plan to assassinate the king, saving the life of the king.

Esther Chapter 3

1 - After these events King Abasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and established his authority over all the princes who were with him.

This is the first time we hear about Haman. He has become one of the king's trusted advisors and is promoted to be second in command of the empire. What this means is that Haman takes care of all the day-to-day things that need doing when you are in charge of the greatest empire in the world.

Who is Haman? At this point the only thing scripture says about him is that he is the son of Hammedatha the Agagite. That he is an Agagite must be important. In identifying him, it is the one thing about Haman that is mentioned right up front. And it will come up again, and again, and again. So, who are the Agagites?

1 Samuel 15

1 - Then Samuel said to Saul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you as king over His people, over Israel; now therefore, listen to the words of the Lord.

2 - Thus says the Lord of hosts, I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt.

3 - Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."

Saul has been directly commanded by God to be God's instrument in punishing Amalek for what he did to Israel. So Saul is formally representing God. He is supposed to kill all of the Amalekites, including even their animals.

Who are the Amalekites that they deserve this? They are descendants of Esau. They are a nomadic people who have been ruthless in their aggression against Israel.

HAMAN THE AGAGITE

The Amalekites' unrelenting brutality toward the Israelites began with an attack at Rephidim (Exodus 17:8–13). This is recounted in

Deuteronomy 25

17 - Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt,

18 - how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God.

19 - Therefore it shall come about when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies, in the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you must not forget.

The Amalekites later joined with the Canaanites and attacked the Israelites at Hormah (Numbers 14:45).

In Judges they entered an alliance with the Moabites (Judges 3:13) and the Midianites (Judges 6:3) to wage war on the Israelites. The Amalekites were Satan's tool over and over again in his attempt to wipe out the Israelites. They were responsible for repeated attacks on the Jewish people, and the destruction of their land, their wells, and their food supplies.

So God says that He... God... will punish the Amalekites. To accomplish this Saul is to kill them all... utterly destroy them all. It's about time that this threat to Israel is brought to an end.

According to 1 Samuel 15 verse 3 God sent Saul on a mission. Was it to capture and rehabilitate the Amalekites? No. In the words of scripture Saul was to utterly destroy the Amalekites. He was to exterminate them. God is using Saul to end the threat to Israel, and to end the threat to the messianic line. What does Saul do?

1 Samuel 15

8 - He captured Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword.

9 - But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed.

Saul disobeys God. Samuel the prophet then kills Agag the king of the Amalekites by hacking him to pieces. But apparently Agag had at least one son who lived. 500 years later one of his descendants, Hammedatha has a son named Haman.

Remember, Mordecai is the son of Kish a Benjamite. Who else is a son of Kish, although a much earlier Kish? King Saul.

What we are seeing in Esther is not an isolated or independent incident limited to just the time period of Esther. It is a continuation of the war that began in the Garden of Eden. A war that continued during the reign of King Saul. Satan was using the Amalekites to try to destroy Israel. God used Saul to defend Israel. And this

HAMAN THE AGAGITE

battle between Israel and the Amalekites (now known as Agagites) continues 550 years later in the Persian Empire.

CHAPTER 17

MORDECAI REFUSES TO BOW

Esther Chapter 3

2 - *All the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman; for so the king had commanded concerning him. But Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage.*

3 - *Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why are you transgressing the king's command?"*

4 - *Now it was when they had spoken daily to him and he would not listen to them, that they told Haman to see whether Mordecai's reason would stand; for he had told them that he was a Jew.*

This is interesting. Mordecai refuses to bow down or to pay homage to Haman. Wanting to understand exactly what was going on, the first question that pops into my mind is: what does it mean to "pay homage?"

What is it that Mordecai is refusing to do? Did this have something to do with false worship? Or was there some other issue?

The dictionary definition of “homage” is: to honor or show respect. To give a formal, public acknowledgment of allegiance.

There is nothing about worship in this definition. Besides, were Persian kings considered Gods who should be worshiped? No. The closest we can come to this is in Daniel when Darius the Mede issues a decree that he is to be worshiped as a god for 30 days. This shows us that Darius was not considered a god. He had to issue a special proclamation that he be worshiped as a god for 30 days.

Ahasuerus was not worshiped as a god... so certainly his second in command would not be worshiped. What did Haman want and deserve? And, BTW, as we'll see, it seems the Haman was filled with quite a bit of pride. He was not only due the normal respect and honor given to kings and high officials, he craved the respect and honor.

What reason does Mordecai give for not bowing to and paying homage to Haman? This is interesting: It appears the reason is simply because he is a Jew. What does that mean? Is a problem for Jews to bow to and pay homage to another person? Let's look at scripture:

2 Samuel 14:4

Now when the woman of Tekoa – a Jewish woman – spoke to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and prostrated herself and said, “Help, O king.”

2 Samuel 18:28

Abimaez called and said to the king, "All is well." And he prostrated himself before the king with his face to the ground.

For a Jew to prostrate themselves in front a king doesn't seem to be a problem. And consider this. Mordecai required Esther to keep her national identity as a Jew secret. That means she had to bow down to the king. And before she became queen she probably had to bow down to a number of high officials. Mordecai had no problem with commanding Esther to bow to high officials. It was the only way she could keep her Jew heritage a secret.

And both Daniel and Nehemiah honor and show respect to the king, using phrases such as "*Let the king live forever.*"

So this does not appear to be an issue of not being allowed by scripture to bow to or honor a high level person. Why is it that being a Jew is something that comes between Mordecai and Haman? All we know about Haman he is second in command, there's no problem with that. And we know he is an Agagite.

Could it be that Mordecai knows Jewish history? It could be that Mordecai, although he is a secular Jew, still knows that the Agagites are mortal enemies of all Jews. It could be that there is no way he is going to give honor to someone from a family that has historically tried to exterminate all Jews.

Another possibility was that the Holy Spirit was leading Mordecai, giving him an understanding that Haman was not a friend of the Jews. Or possibly the

Holy Spirit caused something else related to Mordecai's Jewish heritage to come between him and Haman.

Whatever the reason, Mordecai's reason for not paying homage to Haman seems to be either personal or historical, not a religious reason. And notice, Mordecai is firm on this. Even after the king's servants show him he is disobeying the king's command, he refuses to back down.

CHAPTER 18 HAMAN'S PLAN

So, how does Haman respond?

5 - When Haman saw that Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage to him, Haman was filled with rage.

6 - But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him who the people of Mordecai were; therefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, who were throughout the whole kingdom of Abasuerus.

Why does Haman disdain – consider it beneath him – to lay hands on just Mordecai alone? Instead he wants to destroy all the Jews. One person insults him and he wants to wipe out the entire nation of Israel? That doesn't make sense.

One theory is that the Jews were becoming wealthy, and as a result anti-Semitism was strong in Susa at this time.

We actually have Persian banking records from close to this era. An archive of the records of Murashu Sons of Nippur (bankers) includes over 100 people with Jewish names, many of them with large balances or who were involved in major business transactions. For example, one of the debtors is listed as owing 24,500 bushels of dates, to be delivered at the end of the growing season. How much is that?

That's 24 tractor trailer loads. They didn't have 18 wheelers back then and I don't know how many ox cart loads that would be... but that's A LOT of dates. This is a big farming operation. And they were able to get a big loan. That doesn't happen unless the bankers expect to be paid back. So these were very wealthy Jews.

So maybe, motivated by the success of the Jews, in other words by jealousy, Haman decides to exterminate all of the Jews.

Another possibility is that he knows his family history, and he may be seeking revenge on Jews, considering them his enemies.

Does this seem like a long time to continue to seek revenge? It's been over 500 years since king Agag was killed. Today, what is Iran's position on Israel? Do they want to establish friendly relations? No. Their desire is that Israel, and all Jews, be wiped from the face of the earth.

Present day Iran is Persia. They are not Arabs. They do not speak Arabic. They speak Farsi which is the modern version of the Persian language. And their goal, 1,400 years after Mohammad got angry with the Jews, is to exterminate all Jews. Sometimes hatred never goes away, in particular if it involves Israel.

HAMAN'S PLAN

Getting back to Haman. A good possibility is that Haman is being satanically used to target the entire Jewish race. It's another of Satan's continuing attempts to eliminate the Jews and bring God's plan for Israel and the Messiah to an end. This is the one I personally favor. We're in a spiritual battle. From the beginning in the garden, continuing to the present day, Satan is working to destroy the Jews and thus eliminate the messiah.

But, no matter which of these is the motivation, or maybe there is another possibility, the result is the same. Haman seeks to destroy all Jews. He wants to exterminate the Jewish nation. If that happens, all of mankind is doomed.

CHAPTER 19

THE KING APPROVES THE PLAN

So Haman comes up with a plan, and does everything necessary ensure the king will approve it. He's very thorough in his preparation. Even the date for the destruction of the Jews was determined using the best and most trusted method available to the Persians, divination.

Esther Chapter 3

7 – In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Abasuerus, Pur, that is the lot, was cast before Haman from day to day and from month to month, until the twelfth month, that is the month Adar.

It is interesting that Passover is celebrated during the month of Nisan. While the Jews were celebrating their deliverance out of Egypt, Haman was plotting to exterminate them. Is this just a coincidence?

Haman wanted his presentation to the king to be rock solid. So he turns to astrologers and magicians to cast lots to determine the date. Archeologists have found four-sided pyramid-shaped dice in ancient Persian ruins. They have a number on each side: 1, 2, 5 and 6. These may have been the type of dice used for divination.

In this case a date in the 12th month was revealed as the best day to destroy the Jews. That's 11 months from when Haman presents his plan to the king. Who would plan a vindictive attack and then wait 11 months? Doesn't that seem like a long time?

We can't bring this historical story into our present culture and evaluate things as if this was all happening now, in America. We need to understand the Persian mind during the time of Esther.

In Chapter 6 I mentioned that when a storm destroyed the bridges Ahasuerus built to get his invasion force to Greece, he sent men into the water to lash the water with chains. I bet some of you laughed.

Lashing water with chains, to punish the water, seems to us to be the most ridiculous thing to do. But to them it made sense. The water was alive. Not only that, it was thought there are several gods and demons related to water, such as Gandarewa, a demon, and Vouruskasha the sea god. They needed to be punished and shown that Ahasuerus was in charge. They were serious about this, and they were serious about divination.

When it came to making a decision about the future, divination was the way to do it. And what was revealed through divination was not to be questioned. So for Haman and Ahasuerus, a date 11 months in the

THE KING APPROVES THE PLAN

future... determined by lot to be the best date by divination... well it was just unthinkable to question this date.

But we, of course, we know God is in control:

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. – Proverbs 16:33

As we'll see, the date they set was perfect for what needed to happen. But first, let's see how Haman presents his proposal to the king:

Esther Chapter 3

8 - *Then Haman said to King Abasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of all other people and they do not observe the king's laws, so it is not in the king's interest to let them remain.*

9 - *If it is pleasing to the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who carry on the king's business, to put into the king's treasuries."*

10 - *Then the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews.*

11 - *The king said to Haman, "The silver is yours, and the people also, to do with them as you please."*

Haman makes three points, and then caps it off with an additional incentive.

– First, he tells the king there is a certain group of people, who are scattered throughout the Empire, that are a threat to the Empire. So this is not just a local threat. Nor is this a threat of a single country revolting. For example, Ahasuerus had easily put down rebellions in Egypt and Babylon. This was a threat to the entire empire. This threat is scattered throughout the empire. It's like a disease!

Also notice he does not name the people. It may be Haman was concerned Ahasuerus might remember the decrees issued in favor of the Israelites by Cyrus and Darius (Hystaspes). Or it could be that the Jews had become wealthy and influential, maybe they were a major source of tax revenue the king would not want to lose. Whatever Haman's reasons, the people who he says are the problem are not named.

But whatever reason Haman had in mind, what we are seeing is that God is in control. His plan is unfolding just as He desires. By not giving the name of the people, Haman opens the door to something he did not expect. Opposition from the Queen... from Esther... and that leads to his defeat and the failure of his plan. Remember, he thinks Esther is Persian. This will be an important factor in what happens.

– Second, Haman charges that these troublemakers have their own laws and customs.

It is interesting that Israel's ceremonial, civil, and moral laws frequently have been offensive to non-Jews. Balaam gave testimony to this when he unwillingly prophesied:

THE KING APPROVES THE PLAN

Behold, a people who dwells apart, and will not be reckoned among the nations. – Numbers 23:9

Israel's laws set it aside as unique and separate from the world. However, the Persian Empire was huge. There were many different types of people with unique customs and laws. It was a large and diverse Empire. That Israel had their own customs and laws should not have been a problem... and it wasn't. This charge was just the setup for the next accusation:

– Haman's third accusation was that these people do not follow the king's laws. This is a serious, but false charge. Haman is lying. However that doesn't matter. This isn't a courtroom trial and Haman is the trusted second in command. So far as the king was concerned it must be true, and to not obey the king's laws is completely unacceptable.

What is the penalty for not obeying the king? Death.

But wait, why then is Vashti still alive? She disobeyed the king and yet she still lives. Was it because Ahasuerus was still in love with her? Or maybe she had the favor of the seven princes? I know the answer. Everyone was afraid of her because they knew she would get revenge on anyone who tried to kill her.

It was none of these reasons. Vashti was alive because God wanted her alive.

Throughout this story we are seeing things happen that should not have happened. These unlikely events remind us that this is a story about God, and God acting to accomplish His will. God's will is for the king to do exactly what would be expected... and exactly

what Haman hoped for. God's will is that a decree be issued ordering that all of the Jews be exterminated. A decree that cannot be revoked nor changed.

Haman makes one final point. It is not in the king's interest to let these people remain. Then he adds an incentive. He will pay the king 10,000 talents of silver. That's roughly 500 tons of silver. About 315 billion dollars. It's equal to about 2/3 of the annual income Ahasuerus receives from taxes. That's a substantial amount of money.

Where would Haman get such a large sum of money? He was probably very wealthy, but not that rich. 315 billion dollars is A LOT of silver.

Looking ahead to chapters 4 and 7 we'll see the answers. He expected the silver to come from plundering the Jews who were to be killed.

Ahasuerus, gives him his signet ring, saying in effect, "Let's do it." And then in verse 11 he adds: "You don't have to give me the money."

In initially refusing the money Ahasuerus was probably trying to show that he was motivated by doing what was right, not by the money. So he tells Haman to do whatever he pleased with the money. Of course Haman knew that meant he needed to give it to the king. The offer was made and accepted in a way such that the king's reputation as a fair and just king is not tarnished.

CHAPTER 20

GOD IS A SAVING GOD

The last part of chapter three describes what was done to issue the decree and the response of the people in the city of Susa.

Esther Chapter 3

12 - Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and it was written just as Haman commanded to the king's satraps, to the governors who were over each province and to the princes of each people, each province according to its script, each people according to its language, being written in the name of King Abasnerus and sealed with the king's signet ring.

13 - Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces to destroy, to kill and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to seize their possessions as plunder.

There are exactly 11 months from the date the decree is written until the date it is to be carried out. Why so long? We've already talked about this being God's will. God has some things that need to be accomplished during this 11 month period. God has it all figured out, and while it seems hopeless for the Jews, God will be working during the next 11 months.

14 - A copy of the edict to be issued as law in every province was published to all the peoples so that they should be ready for this day.

15 - The couriers went out impelled by the king's command while the decree was issued at the citadel in Susa; and while the king and Haman sat down to drink, the city of Susa was in confusion.

We have a very dramatic contrast here. The king and Haman sit down to enjoy a drink together. On the other hand, the city is in confusion... people are apprehensive at the publication of what is apparently an arbitrary edict. This decree is shocking and makes no sense. People are thinking, "Who was going to be next?"

What are we seeing happening in Esther? I've been saying God is in control, but maybe a better way to say it is that God provides. God can be trusted to provide whatever we need.

In the case of Esther, what is God providing?

God is providing salvation. We have a God who saves.

GOD IS A SAVING GOD

A decree has gone out not just giving permission to kill Jews on a certain day, but requiring the people of the Persian Empire to kill any and all Jews they see on that day. People are to kill, annihilate and destroy all of the Jews. Young... old... women and children... they are all to be killed.

One of the main messages of this book is that God is a God who saves. Who is Jesus and what is the Gospel?

It's good news, He (Jesus – God) is our Savior.

It's good news, He (Jesus – God) is the one who has come to take away our sin.

It's good news, all of your sin is forgiven... forever.

Jesus, God, is the *Savior of the world.*” – John 4:42

For the Son of Man is come to seek and save that which was lost. – Luke 19:10

We have beheld and near witness that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. – 1 John 4:14

And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved – Acts 4:12

God is a saving God. That is the message of Esther. God is our Savior. He will save the Jews from Haman's decree and He will save you from sin. You can trust God. The book of Esther shows us that we

can trust God's promises... His promises to Israel and His promises to us.

It Started 500 Years before Esther

Long before the decree comes out... I'm talking years... hundreds of years... God puts things in motion to save the Jews in Persia. For example, about 100 years before Esther and Mordecai, their great grandfather Kish is deported from Jerusalem.

Going back before that, Saul does not obey God's command to kill all of the Amalekites, setting up the confrontation between Haman and Mordechai. Do you think that God didn't know that would happen? Of course He did.

God is in control. God will provide. God will save. You can trust God. That's right, you can trust God for your salvation. Just as He has preserved Israel, He has promised to protect you and preserve you. And once you are saved there is nothing, absolutely nothing that can take that away from you.

You can trust God's promises. Every one of them.

CHAPTER 21 THEY MAKE A PLAN

Esther Chapter 4

1 - *When Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and wailed loudly and bitterly.*

2 - *He went as far as the king's gate, for no one was to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth.*

3 - *In each and every province where the command and decree of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing; and many lay on sackcloth and ashes.*

Just a couple of things we should note here. Anyone wearing sackcloth, by law, was not allowed to go beyond the king's gate. No one who was sad was allowed to come into the king's presence. Mordecai was apparently headed in that direction, but fortunately he stopped and did not enter.

We see this same situation in Nehemiah

And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid. – Nehemiah 2:1-2

Nehemiah was sad, and when the king noticed, Nehemiah was afraid... very much afraid. Sadness was not allowed in the presence of a Persian king.

Also notice in verse three that, everywhere the decree of the king went, there was fasting, weeping and wailing, but prayer is not mentioned. The Jews were mourning their fate under this decree, but prayer is not mentioned.

4 - Then Esther's maidens and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen writhed in great anguish. And she sent garments to clothe Mordecai that he might remove his sackcloth from him, but he did not accept them.

5 - Then Esther summoned Hathach from the king's eunuchs, whom the king had appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was.

It appears Esther does not yet know about the decree. She apparently thought Mordecai was mourning over something personal. By sending him some good clothes she was trying to protect him from the

THEY MAKE A PLAN

consequences of being seen wearing sackcloth, should the king notice him even being near the king's gate.

But, when Mordecai rejects the clothing, Esther knows the problem is more serious than she originally thought.

6 - So Hathach went out to Mordecai to the city square in front of the king's gate.

7 - Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact amount of money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews.

8 - He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict which had been issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show Esther and inform her, and to order her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to plead with him for her people.

Hathach must have been highly trusted by both Esther and Mordecai. Mordecai not only tells him about the decree, which is public knowledge, but he also tells him about the money Haman promised to the king's treasury. He even knows the exact amount of money.

This was not public knowledge. Mordecai must have some inside sources that passed this information to him. And this huge bribe... that's what it really was, a bribe... it's dangerous knowledge. It demonstrates there is no rational reason for the decree. The king was bought and paid for. That the king could be bribed this way is not something he would want to become public knowledge.

Mordecai knows that something has to be done. So, he orders Esther to go and plead with the king, seeking his favor so that her people might be saved.

9 - *Hathach came back and related Mordecai's words to Esther.*

10 - *Then Esther spoke to Hathach and ordered him to reply to Mordecai:*

11 - *“All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that for any man or woman who comes to the king to the inner court who is not summoned, he has but one law, that he be put to death, unless the king holds out to him the golden scepter so that he may live. And I have not been summoned to come to the king for these thirty days.”*

12 - *They related Esther's words to Mordecai.*

Normally it would be no big deal for the queen to speak to the king. But in this case there is a problem. There are two unusual and interesting things in what Esther says here:

First – She has not been summoned to come to the king for 30 days. That's very odd. Normally the king and queen would at least have shared a meal on a fairly regular basis. For it to have been 30 days since she had seen the king was unusual.

As far as the historical record, there is nothing significant going on that might require the king's full-time attention during this time. No invasions. No rebellions. Things were quiet. So why hadn't the queen been summoned for the past month?

THEY MAKE A PLAN

Second – why would she be concerned that the king would not raise his scepter to her? She is fearing for her life. There must be a reason why she'd think the king may not spare her life. The risk is real. The king may not raise his scepter. What's going on?

Why is Esther concerned about this? Let's review who she is: She is the woman who was selected just four years previously, out of all the women in the empire, to be the queen. This is the woman who not only had the king's favor and kindness, but she was the one Ahasuerus loved more than all the others. Now she is afraid that he'll have her killed? Doesn't this seem a little odd?

What reason could there be for the king to not raise his scepter to his queen? I think there may be a one word answer... Vashti.

This is conjecture, of course, but might it be that the king was spending time with Vashti? The historical records never mention Vashti being removed as queen, and she may have even been operating as a shadow queen. While she could not appear as the queen in public, she certainly could be spending time with Ahasuerus in private... advising him, guiding him... consoling him. And that would make it very dangerous for the actual queen to assert herself.

We don't know. What we do know is that Esther has a legitimate fear that Ahasuerus may have her killed.

13 - Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews.

14 - *For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?"*

As we read Esther it just seems that odd things keep happening. Here is another one. Why would Esther be afraid that she'll be killed as a Jew? She's been living in the palace for more than four years, and no one knows she is Jewish. As far as anyone knows, she is 100% Persian. So why is she afraid?

Well... what about people who knew her when she was living with Mordecai? She has some Jewish relatives. Notice that scripture says that Esther and her father's house, all are in danger of perishing. Some of her male relatives, of her father's house, are alive. There may be some brothers or cousins who know the queen is Jewish.

So, when the date comes for the decree to go into effect, there are people who know Esther is a Jew, and she will be killed along with all the other Jews.

Will God Get the Credit?

Now we come to a point in the story at which Mordecai almost mentions God. He seems so close to talking about God, but he doesn't.

In verse 14 Mordecai points out that *“relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place.”* Maybe Mordecai knows about God's promises to Israel. Maybe he knows Jewish history. Or maybe he is being inspired by the Holy Spirit. Whatever the source,

THEY MAKE A PLAN

Mordecai points out, without saying the word “God,” that God will not let the Jewish nation be exterminated.

He then then points out to Esther that, if nothing is done, it is very likely Esther and all of her family will be killed. Mordecai is presenting a very pragmatic argument. Esther is facing two options:

1. Go in to the king and maybe be killed or maybe not.
2. Don't do anything and be killed for sure.

Mordecai then adds another strong point, maybe she's been made queen just because someone who could talk to the king was needed, and she was that person. Bingo! Without knowing it, without mentioning God, Mordecai got it right.

God's plan is unfolding exactly as God desired. Esther had been made queen by God, just so she'd be in the right place, at the right time, exactly when the Jewish nation needed someone to speak to the king.

By the way, could God have done this differently? Yes, of course he could.

He could have eliminated Haman's entire family, through disease, a hundred years before all of this happened. Someone else would have been Ahasuerus' Prime Minister, and there would be no story to tell.

Or God could have responded to this threat by allowing all the Jews to be killed, except for one boy in some remote village. A boy who was in the line of David. And from him a new Jewish nation arises and ultimately the Messiah is born.

Does that glorify God? Yes, it would. But people could say the Persians just forgot about that tiny,

remote village. It wasn't God acting to save His people, the Persians were just not thorough in their ethnic cleansing.

On the other hand, we have the story told by book of Esther. It reveals what God actually did. God put some things in place hundreds of years before they were needed. This is an amazing book revealing God's providential actions that demonstrate He is a saving God, and He will preserve not just one Jew, but the entire Jewish nation.

The book of Esther is a lesson for us. Showing us that we can trust God, and His will is going to be done. If we trust Him, He will save us. We can count on it. God provides. God saves. God protects. God can be trusted.

Esther Chapter 4

15 - *Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai,*

16 - *“Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.”*

17 - *So Mordecai went away and did just as Esther had commanded him.*

Esther agrees to go to the king. She asks that all the Jews in Susa fast for three days and nights. And she will do the same.

But notice, once again, prayer is not mentioned. Is this a problem? Fasting without prayer, that's empty.

THEY MAKE A PLAN

It's just dieting. However, when scripture talks about fasting, it does not always mention prayer. For example, when Daniel's 21 day fast is described, prayer is not mentioned.

In those days, I, Daniel, had been mourning for three entire weeks. I did not eat any tasty food, nor did meat or wine enter my mouth, nor did I use any ointment at all until the entire three weeks were completed. – Daniel 10:2-3

From what we know of Daniel, although prayer is not mentioned, he certainly prayed.

In addition, we know that Esther asked Mordecai called on all of the Jews in Susa to assemble. People generally do not come together to fast, but they do come together to pray. Although the Holy Spirit inspired the writer of Esther to not mention prayer, it is likely they were fasting and praying.

However, keep in mind that most atheists turn to pray when facing death. If an atheist were to fast and pray, would we say that is a godly atheist? No. It's a desperate atheist. That most likely is what was happening in Susa.

CHAPTER 22

ESTHER'S BANQUET

It is now time for Esther to go in and see the king.
Will Esther live or will she die?

Esther Chapter 5

1 - Now it came about on the third day that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace in front of the king's rooms, and the king was sitting on his royal throne in the throne room, opposite the entrance to the palace.

2 - When the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she obtained favor in his sight; and the king extended to Esther the golden scepter which was in his hand. So Esther came near and touched the top of the scepter.

3 - Then the king said to her, "What is troubling you, Queen Esther? And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be given to you."

4 - Esther said, "If it pleases the king, may the king and Haman come this day to the banquet that I have prepared for him."

Not only does the king raise his scepter, and Esther lives... he offers her half his kingdom. This, by the way, is a figure of speech indicating the king is willing to give her anything she wants. So what does Esther ask for? That the king and Haman join her for a meal. Why does she do that? Why not just tell the story right then and there?

Remember, she hasn't seen the king for a month. She probably is not be sure of her status in the king's eyes. Will he believe her? Will he even be receptive to what she has to say? How much influence does Haman have? How will the king respond to finding out she is a Jew? Might Vashti be influencing the king to get rid of Esther, and might the king now see this as an easy way to get rid of her?

So Esther starts by inviting the king and Haman to a banquet.

Having a meal together gives her the opportunity to feel him out and maybe determine the best way to present the information.

And remember, this banquet had to have been planned before she went in to see the king. It was planned before she even knew if she would live or die. We know that, because, in the next verses the king and Haman immediately go to have the meal with Esther.

5 - Then the king said, "Bring Haman quickly that we may do as Esther desires." So the king and Haman came to the banquet which Esther had prepared.

ESTHER'S BANQUET

6 - *As they drank their wine at the banquet, the king said to Esther, "What is your petition, for it shall be granted to you. And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done."*

7 - *So Esther replied, "My petition and my request is:*

8 - *if I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and do what I request, may the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king says."*

They have a pleasant meal together. Nothing notable happens. And the king renews his offer of half the kingdom. So he is still acting in a way favorable to Esther. That's good.

But, remember, she is about to accuse Haman, the Prime Minister of the most powerful empire in the world, of treachery. Haman is the man the king most trusts and Esther is going to tell the king that he has done something evil, and the king agreed to it.

Esther's in a tough spot. Keep in mind the king has accepted a huge bribe to do this. Maybe he doesn't even want to know there's something seriously wrong.

So Esther decides to invite the king to a second banquet.

CHAPTER 23

MORDECAI SHALL HANG

Meanwhile, Haman is beaming. He's just had dinner with the king and queen... invited personally by the queen. What an honor!

9 - Then Haman went out that day glad and pleased of heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate and that he did not stand up or tremble before him, Haman was filled with anger against Mordecai.

10 - Haman controlled himself, however, went to his house and sent for his friends and his wife Zeresh.

11 - Then Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches, and the number of his sons, and every instance where the king had magnified him and how he had promoted him above the princes and servants of the king.

12 - Haman also said, "Even Esther the queen let no one but me come with the king to the banquet which she had

prepared; and tomorrow also I am invited by her with the king.

13 - *Yet all of this does not satisfy me every time I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate."*

14 - *Then Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him, "Have a gallows fifty cubits high made and in the morning ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it; then go joyfully with the king to the banquet." And the advice pleased Haman, so he had the gallows made.*

Remember, we're thinking of this story as though it were a chess match between Satan and God. And Satan knows things that Ahasuerus and Haman do not, such as knowing that Esther is a Jew.

Satan probably thought he had the game won. All of the Jews were to be killed. The only Jew with access to the king is Esther, and things had been arranged such that she had not seen the king for a month.

Satan thought she had been taken out of the game, but, he was wrong. She is still in the game, and not only that, the king seems favorably disposed to listen to what she has to say. What is Satan to do? Something has to be done, or his plan is going to fall apart.

Have you ever wondered why Haman suddenly changes his mind about Mordecai?

Mordecai insults Haman by not giving him the honor he is due, honor that has been commanded by the king. Disobeying the king brings the death penalty. Mordecai should have died. Instead, Haman sets his sights on killing all of the Jews.

But now, he walks out through the gate and, as usual, Mordecai does not honor him nor show respect.

MORDECAI SHALL HANG

And apparently Haman even expected Mordecai to fear him... which didn't happen. Suddenly Haman wants to kill him right away.

Yes, Haman is puffed up with pride as a result of Esther inviting him to her banquet with the king. So the insult hurts even more. But, in verse 10, Haman was able to control his anger. Now all it seems to take is a little prodding from his family and friends, and he decides that Mordecai must be hanged in the morning. Maybe this is Satan making a move to eliminate the leader of the opposition, or scare Esther into being quiet. Maybe, with Mordecai gone, Esther's pleading before the king can be countered. We don't know what was going on in Haman's mind, but we do know he wants Mordecai hanged ASAP.

So Haman has the gallows built. There will be no delay in the morning. As soon as Haman gets the king's approval, Mordecai shall hang.

CHAPTER 24 A COINCIDENCE?

Think about this. Haman is so confident the king will approve hanging Mordecai, that he has already gone ahead and built a gallows. It's a huge structure 75 feet tall. Everyone can see it. Everyone would ask, "Who's that for?" And to build a gallows that big, and do it overnight, took a lot of manpower. It's no small expense. But Haman was confident those gallows would be used the next day... and they would.

Will Mordecai live... and what will God do to save him? And what about Esther? What will happen during her second banquet? And finally, will Esther be able to do, or say something that will save the Jewish nation?

Put yourself in Esther's place. What would you say to the king? How would you bring up the topic of the king's decree? What would you say to get him to change his mind? And, what good would it do anyway? The decree of a Persian king cannot be changed or withdrawn. Isn't this all a waste of time? The decree has been made, all of the Jews will be killed in roughly nine months. The clock is ticking.

Let's continue with the story... it's time for God to make another move.

Esther Chapter 6

1 - During that night the king could not sleep so he gave an order to bring the book of records, the chronicles, and they were read before the king.

This seems strange. Why would the king, in the middle of the night, want to listen to someone reading government records?

The Persian book of Records would have been similar to our Congressional Record. Have you ever read the Congressional Record? It is the official record of what congress does, and it is boring... incredibly boring. Trying to read that in the middle of the night would be sure to put anyone to sleep. And maybe that is what the king was trying to accomplish.

So he has it read to him. The part that is read just happens... just some kind of coincidence... it just happens to be something relevant to what's going on.

2 - It was found written what Mordecai had reported concerning Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs who were doorkeepers, that they had sought to lay hands on King Abasuerus.

3 - The king said, "What honor or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" Then the king's servants who attended him said, "Nothing has been done for him."

Imagine that? Like the Congressional Record the Persian Book of Records was huge. And they just

A COINCIDENCE

happen to randomly read about Mordecai saving the king's life four years ago. What a coincidence! No. Once again it is God's providence.

Let's talk about coincidences for a moment.

Coincidences are things that appear to us to be happening by random chance. But, remember, everything is under the control of a sovereign God who knows the number of hairs on every head (Luke 12:7). Jesus said that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without our Father's notice (Matthew 10:29).

In Isaiah 46, God states unequivocally that He is in charge of everything:

Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'; calling a bird of prey from the east, The man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.
– Isaiah 46:9-11

When we consider things that happen we tend to classify them as “important” or “unimportant.” We have no problem believing that God is in charge of the “big things,” the important things. But I think we assume that such a big God would not trouble Himself with the seemingly minuscule events of our everyday lives.

However, that understanding is colored by our human limitations and not supported by Scripture. For

God, there are no unimportant events. He does not need to conserve His strength, because His power is limitless. His attention is never divided. If the Lord God tracks every sparrow, then nothing is too small for His attention.

God is referred to as the Almighty, a name meaning that He has unlimited power and absolute dominion. Nothing escapes His attention. No detail is too small.

We also need to keep in mind that scripture is clear that God allows us... sinful humans... to make mistakes and reap the consequences of those mistakes. But, that does not mean He is not in control. God is sovereign. Never forget...

God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.
– Romans 8:28

He causes all things to work together for good... even when we think are messing things up. There are no coincidences. In ways only known to God, even our “mistakes” and “unplanned” events are a part of His plan. He uses them all to achieve His purposes. It happens in our lives and that's what is happening in the book of Esther.

CHAPTER 25

HAMAN SPECIFIES THE REWARD

Here is something else I've wondered about. Four years ago Mordecai saved the king's life. The king then has Mordecai's name written in the book, but he does absolutely nothing for Mordecai. That always seemed odd to me. I'd have expected Ahasuerus to express his gratitude right away... at least in some small way. It was important for Persian kings to show their gratitude immediately. But nothing done for Mordecai. Why?

Here's the answer. It was not God's timing. God's timing was to have Mordecai rewarded four years later. So here comes his reward. It's early in the morning and Haman is anxious to talk to the king about hanging Mordecai. The king, on the other hand, needs some advice on how to best reward Mordecai.

4 - So the king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace in order to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows which he had prepared for him.

Apparently the king wanted to consult any high official who was available at this early hour. It just happened – another coincidence (God's providence) – that Haman was there. Most likely he was up all night supervising the building of the gallows and was excited about having the hated Mordecai hanged as early in the morning as possible.

5 - The king's servants said to him, "Behold, Haman is standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in."

6 - So Haman came in and the king said to him, "What is to be done for the man whom the king desires to honor?" And Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king desire to honor more than me?"

Of course, Haman is thinking, who could it be that the king would want to honor, except for me? He is the king's right hand man. He has just been honored by the queen inviting him to a banquet the day before. And he's been invited to a second banquet later that day. Does this bring to mind Proverbs 16:18?

*Pride goes before destruction,
And a haughty spirit before stumbling.*

Of course, Haman is thinking, the king must want to honor me. So Haman describes the reward he'd like to receive:

7 - Then Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king desires to honor,

HAMAN SPECIFIES THE REWARD

8 - *let them bring a royal robe which the king has worn, and the horse on which the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown has been placed;*

9 - *and let the robe and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble princes and let them array the man whom the king desires to honor and lead him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him, 'Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor.'*"

What a reward! Not money. Not property. But fame... public honor... that's what Haman craved.

Notice that Haman is able to quickly list the things that, in the Persian culture, would most honor the recipient. He must have thought about this in advance. He must have planned for the day when he would be honored by the king... considering in his mind how he'd like to be honored. And now the king was going to do it, or so he thought.

Some lessons from scripture come to mind...

for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. – Matthew 6:21

Where was Haman's treasure? In himself. He craved glory and honor.

As Christians our focus is on Christ, and glorifying Him. Instead of focusing on ourselves, we treasure Christ and what He did on the cross:

...keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. – Colossians 3:1-2

Where are Haman's thoughts? On himself. On worldly honor. He not only wanted to wear the royal robes and ride the king's horse. They had to be the things the king had actually used. And what would happen? Everyone watching would probably, at first, think it was the king himself coming.

And who was to wear the crown? The horse. That's odd, isn't it?

We don't know what this means. Nowhere in Persian history is a horse wearing a crown described. However, there are pictures of horses with what appears to be a crown on their head. So it was something that was done... but we don't know why.

But, since Haman asked for it, you can bet it brought great honor to the one riding the horse.

CHAPTER 26

MORDECAI'S REWARD

10 - *Then the king said to Haman, "Take quickly the robes and the horse as you have said, and do so for Mordecai the Jew, who is sitting at the king's gate; do not fall short in anything of all that you have said."*

11 - *So Haman took the robe and the horse, and arrayed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city square, and proclaimed before him, "Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor."*

The king doesn't give Haman any other option. He must quickly honor Mordecai in exactly the way he described.

What humiliation. This had to be really tough for Haman to do. He had to magnify and honor the man he hated the most. And as he lead the horse with Mordecai decked out in the king's robes... Haman had to shout out... *"Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor."*

Mordecai had to be literally choking on those words. But, this was the king's command. The only other option was to be killed for disobedience. He expected Mordecai to be swinging from the gallows that morning. Instead, he... Haman... was honoring Mordecai with the highest possible honor.

This is typical of what we, as Christians receive. Our reward is a delayed, but glorious honor. Our service for Christ is not honored by the world, and in many cases Christians are persecuted and suffer for serving the Lord. But we're not looking for honor and glory for ourselves. Our purpose is to glorify God. Serving Him, while being ignored, or even persecuted, that is what glorifies God. We do not need to be worried about anything else.

For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.
– Matthew 6:25-33

There is something else that is odd. In verse ten the king identifies Mordecai as a Jew. He probably learned that from the records he had just read. But, what's odd is that he does not make a connection between Mordecai being a Jew and his decree, written by Haman, that all Jews are wicked, cannot be trusted, and must be killed.

MORDECAI'S REWARD

But, remember, Haman did not reveal that the decree was targeting the Jews. At this point in time the king still may not know he has signed a decree ordering all Jews to be killed. So, of course, that Mordecai is a Jew is not a concern.

CHAPTER 27 HAMAN'S FAMILY

12 - *Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman hurried home, mourning, with his head covered.*

13 - *Haman recounted to Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and Zeresh his wife said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish origin, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him."*

The attitude of Haman's wife and friends has changed. They originally counseled vengeance. But now, they seem to have learned, for the first time that Mordecai may be Jewish. And they seem to know some history leading them to conclude that, if he is Jewish, Haman will not overcome him.

If could be that they've heard about God's providence for the Jews since the days of Cyrus the great, about 65 years ago. Or, could it be that like Balaam, they spoke beyond their wisdom... through the Holy Spirit saying more than they actually knew.

In either case, his friends have correctly predicted his downfall... and now it's time for the second banquet. If anything, Haman is probably looking forward to the banquet. He's had a really bad day so far, but now he's going to a banquet with just the king and queen. That's got to be a good thing.

14 - While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hastily brought Haman to the banquet which Esther had prepared.

This is getting exciting. Let's move on into Esther chapter 7 to find out what happens at Esther's second banquet, which this time is a wine banquet.

CHAPTER 28

THE TRUTH REVEALED

Esther Chapter 7

1 - *Now the king and Haman came to drink wine with Esther the queen.*

2 - *And the king said to Esther on the second day also as they drank their wine at the banquet, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done."*

The king has now promised to grant Esther's request three times, no matter what it is. He has painted himself into a corner in some respects. He could still refuse her request, but after emphatically saying three times that he'll give her what she wants, not granting Esther's request will be difficult.

And the king seems to like drinking a lot of wine... I mean a lot. That was not unusual among Persian

rulers. They were known for heavy drinking during their banquets. At Esther's second banquet it appears he is, let's be kind and call it, "feeling good" from the wine.

What about Esther? Esther was probably aware of the events of that morning. She had to know that Mordecai had been greatly honored and Haman totally disgraced. Everybody had to be talking about it.

God's providential actions were becoming obvious, and Esther could see the direction events were heading. Mordecai was being raised up and Haman was in trouble. So this would have given her confidence. Yet, she still could not be sure how the king would react.

3 - Then Queen Esther replied, "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me as my petition, and my people as my request;

That had to have caught the king by surprise. What does his queen ask for? Her life! The queen's life is at risk? What is going on? Who's threatening the Queen?

She appears to have carefully prepared what she planned to say. She goes on to explain why her life is threatened.

4a - for we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated.

Esther is using the exact wording of the decree given in verse 2:13... *"to destroy, to kill and to annihilate all the Jews"*

THE TRUTH REVEALED

And notice, she describes herself and her people as having been sold. That, of course, refers to the silver offered by Haman in exchange for permission to destroy these “unwanted and dangerous people.” Esther has revealed that she knows about the bribe, possibly causing the king to think twice about how this will make him look.

4b - Now if we had only been sold as slaves, men and women, I would have remained silent, for the trouble would not be commensurate with the annoyance to the king.”

5 - Then King Abasuerus asked Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who would presume to do thus?”

From the king's perspective, what is going on? What is the king hearing?

He is coming off a night in which he had been reminded that his own life had been threatened in the recent past. Now he hears the queen's life was being threatened. Who was responsible for this?!!! Who would presume to threaten the life of the queen?

At this point it appears he has not yet fully made the connection to the decree to kill all the Jews, but he probably was starting to figure it out... especially since Esther used the language of the decree to describe the problem.

Esther answers the king's question: she identifies the source of the threat to her life...

6 - Esther said, “A foe and an enemy is this wicked Haman!” Then Haman became terrified before the king and queen.

The king has just learned someone has threatened the Queen's life. Then Esther reveals it is Haman who is the source of this threat.

What he is hearing now is that his #1 right-hand man... his most trusted advisor... is threatening the life of the queen. Haman was having a bad day, and it just got worse.

7 - The king arose in his anger from drinking wine and went into the palace garden; but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm had been determined against him by the king.

This is a wine banquet and maybe the king has had just a little too much and that may have contributed to his being extremely angry. But, this revelation about Haman is shocking! He needs to step out and sort out all he has just heard.

With the king gone Haman sees that he has one last chance. He can beg for his life from Queen Esther. This will set the stage for the event that seals Haman's fate... and, of course, we're seeing the hand of God throughout all of this.

When Haman went to this second banquet he thought the Queen was Persian. Now he learns she is a Jew who has been condemned to death by the decree he had tricked the king into signing. Haman knew he was in trouble...

PLUS... at each banquet he had heard the king favor the Queen by offering her half his kingdom. The king's favor was definitely with his queen. Haman was trapped between an enraged king and an offended queen. The only one who could spare his life was the one accusing him, the queen.

THE TRUTH REVEALED

My guess is that he intended to fall at her feet and beg for mercy. But, he got too close to the queen. BTW, had Haman knelt a few feet away from the couch, he still would have been too close to the queen. You don't get physically close to the Queen of Persia... especially when you are alone with her. But, in his rush to beg for mercy he was actually falling on the couch where Esther was reclining.

8 - Now when the king returned from the palace garden into the place where they were drinking wine, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. Then the king said, "Will he even assault the queen with me in the house?" As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.

What word went out of the king's mouth? This is not referring to the king declaring Haman was assaulting the queen. These words "*Will he even assault the queen with me in the house?*" are recorded so that we know what was going on in the king's mind. The statement about "*the word went out of the king's mouth*" is referring to a command that was not recorded... the command to execute Haman.

CHAPTER 29 HAMAN EXECUTED

9 - *Then Harbonah, one of the eunuchs who were before the king said, "Behold indeed, the gallows standing at Haman's house fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai who spoke good on behalf of the king!" And the king said, "Hang him on it."*

The gallows Haman had built were so high that they could be seen from the palace... and it apparently was known that Haman had those gallows built to hang Mordecai. I imagine Haman was so confident he was even boasting about it earlier that morning.

Haman, the man whose decree would result in the death the queen... Haman, the man who deceived the king, tricking him into approving that decree... Haman, the man who planned to hang the man who had saved the king's life. Haman was about to be hanged.

10 - *So they hanged Haman on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai, and the king's anger subsided.*

So we're at the happy ending. Evil has been defeated. Haman is dead. God is victorious... except this is not the happy ending. The king's decree that all the Jews, and that includes Esther, are to be killed is still in effect. And it cannot be revoked or changed.

The evil Haman has received justice, but his plan to eradicate all of the Jews is still in place. But not only that, think about why this all came about...

Haman was an Agagite. Saul was supposed to have killed all the Agagites, but he didn't. Now Haman is dead. Are there any Agagites still living? The answer is yes. So what about them? Does the battle between the Agagites and Israel continue? And how does God solve the problem of the Haman's decree and save the Jewish nation.

God has not been mentioned once in this book, yet we see God's hand everywhere in what has been happening. I've used the word "coincidence" several times. But there are no coincidences. What we are seeing is God providentially working his will.

But notice, we need to be willing. We have a part in God's plans. James 2 says:

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? – James 2:14

Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. – James 2:17

Esther needed to be willing to go into the king. She had a part to play and could chose to either go in to the king or not.

HAMAN EXECUTED

However, as Mordecai said, if she had not gone into the king, God would have saved the Jews in another way. But it would not have been because He had to switch to plan “B.” It would have been because His plan never involved Esther going into the king.

This is a tough one to get our mind around. We have free will. We can, so to speak, choose to go into the king or not. We freely make that choice. But, whatever we choose, it is exactly what God planned. We're not puppets, with God pulling our strings. God expects us to freely participate and be a part of His plans. We are not to just sit around. We are called to action. But God already knows what we'll do, and whatever it is we actually do, it is already a part of His plan.

I know that's confusing. But, if we could completely understand God and how He works, we would be greater than God.

Esther's Choice

We're constantly faced with a myriad of options. What should we do? How do we make our decision? Many times we are faced with needing to do something we don't want to do. Esther did not want to go into the king.

She went into the king based on pragmatism, not because it was the right thing to do. It was the course that gave her the greatest probability of living. Her decision had nothing to do with God. But, did it glorify God? YES, it did! Although glorifying God was not in her thoughts, what she did glorified God because it is part of a story showing us God providentially working.

That is how we know what to do. We should evaluate our options by asking, which one most glorifies God? Is what I'm thinking of doing going to point to Jesus? Is it going to bring the most glory to God? If the answer to either of these questions is yes, do it.

CHAPTER 30

SAVING THE JEWS

This is it. The evil Prime Minister, Haman, the Agagite, has been hanged. It looks like we've come to the end of the story. Except, the king's decree is still in effect. The Jews still face extinction.

So let's pick up the story in Esther chapter 8. It's been a busy day. Mordecai was honored for saving the king's life four years earlier. That same day Esther had her second banquet and revealed Haman was the source of the threat against her life. Later that same day Haman was hanged. It's been a busy day. But it's not over.

As we continue we should note there are still two problems that need to be resolved. The decree to kill all the Jews is still in place and there are still some Agagites, the mortal enemies of the Jews, still alive. God is about to deal with both of these problems.

Esther Chapter 8

1 - *On that day King Ahasuerus gave the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews, to Queen Esther; and Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had disclosed what he was to her.*

2 - *The king took off his signet ring which he had taken away from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.*

Remember, Mordecai was working at the king's gate, indicating he already held a fairly high government position. The best guess is that he may have been a high level magistrate. So a promotion to Prime Minister was not unthinkable. Plus Mordecai had some characteristics that were very important to the king... he was trustworthy, and he had saved the king's life, proving he was not a threat to the king.

3 - *Then Esther spoke again to the king, fell at his feet, wept and implored him to avert the evil scheme of Haman the Agagite and his plot which he had devised against the Jews.*

4 - *The king extended the golden scepter to Esther. So Esther arose and stood before the king.*

5 - *Then she said, "If it pleases the king and if I have found favor before him and the matter seems proper to the king and I am pleasing in his sight, let it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the king's provinces.*

SAVING THE JEWS

6 - *For how can I endure to see the calamity which will befall my people, and how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?"*

7 - *So King Abasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given the house of Haman to Esther, and him they have hanged on the gallows because he had stretched out his hands against the Jews.*

8 - *Now you write to the Jews as you see fit, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's signet ring; for a decree which is written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's signet ring may not be revoked."*

9 - *So the king's scribes were called at that time in the third month (that is, the month Sivan), on the twenty-third day; and it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded to the Jews, the satraps, the governors and the princes of the provinces which extended from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to every province according to its script, and to every people according to their language as well as to the Jews according to their script and their language.*

10 - *He wrote in the name of King Abasuerus, and sealed it with the king's signet ring, and sent letters by couriers on horses, riding on steeds sired by the royal stud.*

11 - *In them the king granted the Jews who were in each and every city the right to assemble and to defend their lives, to destroy, to kill and to annihilate the entire army*

of any people or province which might attack them, including children and women, and to plunder their spoil, 12 - on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (that is, the month Adar).

Have you ever wondered by God chose to protect His people this way?

The solution to Haman's decree – that all Jews are to be killed – is that the Jews are allowed to defend themselves. That's sets up a situation in which the Jews and their enemies are going to fight and people are going to get killed. As we'll see in chapter 9, over 75,000 people will be killed.

Might there not have been a better way to do this? Some way that did not involve so much killing?

I have an idea. God could cause the king to issue a decree requiring the Jews to have a festival. They must gather at least one mile outside whatever city they lived in. All non-Jews would be banned from coming within one mile of these festival sites. In other words, the people who might want to kill the Jews based on the first decree are not allowed to get close to them.

So that keeps the two groups apart. They can't get at each other to kill each other. At the end of the day the Jews have survived and nobody gets hurt... and the Jews have had a day-long party... and a new festival day has been established. Everything that happens in Esther has been accomplished, and no one gets killed.

Isn't that a better plan? Isn't partying all day better than killing? I think I've come up with a better plan than God. He should have asked me.

SAVING THE JEWS

But wait, my plan is missing something. It solves the problem of Haman's decree. It does not solve the problem of the Agagites and the people who want to wipe out the Jews. Haman wasn't the only one, as we'll see. So let's continue with God's plan.

CHAPTER 31

THE ISRAELITES FIGHT BACK

13 - *A copy of the edict to be issued as law in each and every province was published to all the peoples, so that the Jews would be ready for this day to avenge themselves on their enemies.*

14 - *The couriers, hastened and impelled by the king's command, went out, riding on the royal steeds; and the decree was given out at the citadel in Susa.*

As I mentioned in chapter 9 the Persians were the inventors of the pony express system. They had an efficient and fast mail system. We're now near the end of the third month – the Jews are to be killed in the 11th month – so there is still plenty of time for the new proclamation to get to the furthest reaches of the empire and for the Jews to prepare.

BTW, do you now see why God, through Haman's casting of lots, set the date for the execution of the Jews so far in the future? It provides plenty of time for everything to happen that needs to happen.

15 - *Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a large crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple; and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced.*

Remember, it's still the same day Haman was hanged. Now the city of Susa is rejoicing because of Mordecai's elevation to the position of Prime Minister. Either Mordecai had a good reputation and was well-liked throughout the city, which is a very real possibility. He might have become known for the fair and just decisions he made as a magistrate at the king's gate. Or it could be the people of Susa really hated Haman. Anyone was better than Haman. My guess it was a little of both. But, in either case, Mordecai's elevation to Prime Minister was greeted with joy.

16 - *For the Jews there was light and gladness and joy and honor.*

17 - *In each and every province and in each and every city, wherever the king's commandment and his decree arrived, there was gladness and joy for the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many among the peoples of the land became Jews, for the dread of the Jews had fallen on them.*

Verse 17 says several things we should note. First, notice this verse is talking about the reaction of non-Jews to the new decree: *wherever the king's commandment and his decree arrived, there was gladness and **joy for the Jews***

These are non-Jews rejoicing because the Jews can now defend themselves.

Many were probably rejoicing because an arbitrary decree had been effectively nullified. Remember how

THE ISRAELITES FIGHT BACK

in Esther chapter 3, when the original decree went out, the city of Susa was in confusion. That first decree was disturbing. It appeared to be arbitrary. No reason is given, just kill all the Jews. People were thinking, “Who is going be next?”

So for some people it appears the king has come to his senses. He has seen the folly of what he did and responding in a rational manner.

In other cases people were rejoicing for and with Jews. Rejoicing with their friends, their neighbors, and their co-workers. People were happy. Haman's decree had been countered and their friends could defend themselves. And not only that...

many among the peoples of the land became Jews, for the dread of the Jews had fallen on them.

People were becoming Jews. Why? Because, they were afraid of the Jews. The Jews now had the right to kill those who were their enemies. What's the best way to be sure you are not seen as an enemy of the Jews? Become one of them.

So what type of people does this leave? Who are those who do not fit in either of the above two categories: either rejoicing or becoming a Jew? Those who were truly enemies of the Jews. Those who truly hated the Jews.

Esther Chapter 9

1 - Now in the twelfth month (that is, the month Adar), on the thirteenth day when the king's command and edict were about to be executed, on the day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, it was turned

to the contrary so that the Jews themselves gained the mastery over those who hated them.

2 - The Jews assembled in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Abasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm; and no one could stand before them, for the dread of them had fallen on all the peoples.

Scripture says the dread had fallen on all the peoples. God put fear in the heart of all of the people. Those who hated the Jews could not fight. Imagine trying to battle someone in a sword fight, and your knees are knocking and your legs are turning to rubber out of fear.

But not only that, the power of the government turned on the enemies of the Jews.

3 - Even all the princes of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and those who were doing the king's business assisted the Jews, because the dread of Mordecai had fallen on them.

Even the government officials of Persia turned on the enemies of the Jews. Notice it says “ALL” of the princes of the provinces, as well as the lower government leaders... they all assisted the Jews.

4 - Indeed, Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces; for the man Mordecai became greater and greater.

5 - Thus the Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying; and they did what they pleased to those who hated them.

THE ISRAELITES FIGHT BACK

6 - *At the citadel in Susa the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men,*

7 - *and Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha,*

9 - *Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai and Vaiꞗatha,*

10 - *the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Jews' enemy; but they did not lay their hands on the plunder.*

What are these verses saying was accomplished? The ten sons of Haman were killed. Who were they? They were Agagites, Israel's arch enemy. 500 years earlier God had commanded Saul to kill all the Amalekites. Saul let King Agag live. But now the end of King Agag's line has come.

Were there other Agagite families in addition to Haman's? Most likely yes. But their hearts were hardened against Israel. They would not be rejoicing in Mordecai's decree, nor would they be seeking to become Jewish. In their hatred of Israel they would be the ones trying to kill the Jews that day. And they died that day.

11 - *On that day the number of those who were killed at the citadel in Susa was reported to the king.*

12 - *The king said to Queen Esther, "The Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman at the citadel in Susa. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your petition? It shall*

even be granted you. And what is your further request? It shall also be done.”

13 - Then said Esther, “If it pleases the king, let tomorrow also be granted to the Jews who are in Susa to do according to the edict of today; and let Haman’s ten sons be hanged on the gallows.”

14 - So the king commanded that it should be done so; and an edict was issued in Susa, and Haman’s ten sons were hanged.

Susa is the capital and the citadel is the center of government in Susa. It appears the initial fighting took place at the citadel, indicating there were probably quite a few people in government that hated the Jews, including Haman’s ten sons who were killed at the citadel.

But it appears there may have been pockets of resistance remaining in Susa. Or it could be that queen Esther become aware of a plan to continue the fight the next day, or possibly a plan to take the leading Jews by surprise and kill them. Whatever the reason, there were still more to be done.

Also note the queen asks for the dead bodies of Haman's sons be hung on the gallows. Why hang dead bodies? Because this would serve as a warning to others to stop their efforts to kill the Jews... see what happened to Haman's sons? That's what will happen to you.

This lends support to the idea that there are people in Susa who were planning to try to kill Jews on the 14th of Adar, even though the king’s original decree specified only one day of killing.

THE ISRAELITES FIGHT BACK

But, whatever the reason she requests that the second edict be extended for one day in Susa... and it was. As we'll see in the next verse an additional 300 men are killed. There must have been a substantial threat against the Jews remaining in Susa after the first day.

Also notice in the next two verses that scripture twice mentions that the Jews did not take plunder. The king's decree said they had the right to take plunder, but they didn't. We see back in verse 5 that the Jews did as they pleased. They could have taken whatever they wanted... but they took nothing.

Scripture does not explain this, but it does show that the Jews were most likely just defending themselves. They were not going out seeking vengeance, trying to inflict the maximum pain on those whom they considered enemies. That would include taking plunder... taking their enemies' property. They didn't do that.

15 - The Jews who were in Susa assembled also on the fourteenth day of the month Adar and killed three hundred men in Susa, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

16 - Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces assembled, to defend their lives and rid themselves of their enemies, and kill 75,000 of those who hated them; but they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

The fighting is done. The Jews are saved. Instead of the nation of Israel being exterminated as Haman planned, the enemies of the Jews have been exterminated.

Of course, following this great victory... their salvation from extinction... they wanted to celebrate. The next verses describe the beginnings of the Festival of Purim.

CHAPTER 32 GOD VICTORIOUS

17 - This was done on the thirteenth day of the month Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made it a day of feasting and rejoicing.

18 - But the Jews who were in Susa assembled on the thirteenth and the fourteenth of the same month, and they rested on the fifteenth day and made it a day of feasting and rejoicing.

19 - Therefore the Jews of the rural areas, who live in the rural towns, make the fourteenth day of the month Adar a holiday for rejoicing and feasting and sending portions of food to one another.

It seems that in the beginning there was a little problem concerning when this victory should be celebrated. For most of the Jews, primarily those in the rural areas, they defended themselves on the 13th of Adar, won the victory and then celebrated on the 14th

But in the city of Susa the fighting continued for an extra day, the 14th. So they celebrated on the 15th, after the fighting ended in Susa.

Now they've got a problem. On which day should the victory be celebrated? In the next verse we're jumping forward in time, possible just a few months but most likely several years forward in time... Mordecai has a solution...

20 - Then Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Abasuerus, both near and far,

21 - obliging them to celebrate the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same month, annually,

22 - because on those days the Jews rid themselves of their enemies, and it was a month which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

23 - Thus the Jews undertook what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them.

Mordecai's solution was to make it a two-day celebration... and that's what we have today. Purim is a major Jewish festival that starts with a day of fasting on the 12th of Adar to commemorate Esther's fast. Then two days of celebration that are called the Jewish Marti-Gra.

GOD VICTORIOUS

The central part of the festival is the reading of the book of Esther. Whenever Haman's name is read the people are supposed to boo and hiss and use noisemakers to make so much noise, so loud that no one can hear his name read.

Purim also involves giving gifts of food, parades, dressing up, putting on plays... it's a big party.

Next scripture appears to provide some of what Mordecai wrote. It reviews what happened, and gives us a quick summary of the origins of this festival.

24 - For Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the adversary of all the Jews, had schemed against the Jews to destroy them and had cast Pur, that is the lot, to disturb them and destroy them.

25 - But when it came to the king's attention, he commanded by letter that his wicked scheme which he had devised against the Jews, should return on his own head and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.

And now the author of Esther adds his summary:

26 - Therefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. And because of the instructions in this letter, both what they had seen in this regard and what had happened to them,

27 - the Jews established and made a custom for themselves and for their descendants and for all those who allied themselves with them, so that they would not fail to celebrate these two days according to their regulation and according to their appointed time annually.

28 - *So these days were to be remembered and celebrated throughout every generation, every family, every province and every city; and these days of Purim were not to fail from among the Jews, or their memory fade from their descendants.*

29 - *Then Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, with Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority to confirm this second letter about Purim.*

30 - *He sent letters to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Abasuerus, namely, words of peace and truth,*

31 - *to establish these days of Purim at their appointed times, just as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had established for them, and just as they had established for themselves and for their descendants with instructions for their times of fasting and their lamentations.*

32 - *The command of Esther established these customs for Purim, and it was written in the book.*

Finally... there seems to be a postscript that essentially says... if you don't believe this, check the records of the Medes and Persians. It's written in the book that chronicles their history... yes, this is a true story.

CHAPTER 33 THE PROLOGUE

Esther Chapter 10

1 - *Now King Abasuerus laid a tribute on the land and on the coastlands of the sea.*

2 - *And all the accomplishments of his authority and strength, and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia?*

3 - *For Mordecai the Jew was second only to King Abasuerus, and great among the Jews and in favor with his many kinsmen, one who sought the good of his people and one who spoke for the welfare of his whole nation.*

So it looks like things turned out well for all the Jews, as well as Mordecai individually. The last thing mentioned about King Ahasuerus is that he levied a

tribute... a tax... on the coast lands. Why is that mentioned?

This is a tax Ahasuerus imposed in his later years. It appears it is mentioned here to show that Ahasuerus prospered as a result of Mordecai being in charge of things.

So what happened to the king?

Following the failure to conquer Greece, history records that the character of Ahasuerus slowly deteriorated... as his harem grew larger.

You may have noticed throughout Esther that he does not seem to make any decisions of his own. Someone suggests something, and he responds, “That’s a good idea. Do it.”

Toward the end of his reign he was strongly influenced by the commander of his guard, Hycanian Artabanub, and the eunuch who was his chamberlain, Aspanitres.

Eight years after the inauguration of the festival of Purim Ahasuerus was assassinated in his bedchamber Aspanitres was involved, joined by the king's son-in-law Megabyzus, a general who had married one of the king's daughters.

Megabyzus resented the king's refusal to take action on a charge that his wife – the king's daughter – has cheated on him. So he joined in a conspiracy that resulted in the assassination of the king.

The king's son, Artaxerxes – the youngest son of Vashti – became the next king.

So that's the story of Esther. It's the story of the origin of the Jewish Festival of Purim. But this book has a more important purpose than that. It is the

THE PRLOGUE

story of God working... of God providentially saving Israel from a centuries old threat. It's a story that tells Israel today, as well as us, that God is in control. We can trust His promises.

Satan was continuing to use the Amalekites, through the descendants of King Agag, to try to eliminate Israel and prevent the Messiah from being born.

God saved Israel using people who were unaware His involvement in their lives. And He did it in a way such that He was glorified and at the same time the Amalekite threat to Israel was ended.

God also did it in a way that reveals Him as a saving God whom we can trust. We can trust His promises. We may fail, but we can trust God...

Even if we are not aware of His presence in our lives. God is sovereign, and His will... will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

CHAPTER 34

WHY ISN'T GOD MENTIONED?

On the human level Esther is a secular story. God is not mentioned because God has little or no part in the lives of the main characters, in particular Esther and Mordecai.

Another reason that God is not mentioned is that his focus had returned to Jerusalem. The temple had been rebuilt and dedicated. The focus of God's theocratic plan was back on Jerusalem.

The main reason why God isn't mentioned is because this brings greater glory to God. In Esther we see a people who have largely become Persian. They are still national Israel... they remember their heritage... but they live and think as Persians. God is not a part of their everyday lives. They have forgotten God, BUT God has not forgotten them. And that is why God is glorified. Esther is a story in which we see the providential acts of God over and over. We see God working to save His people both individually and as a nation. God demonstrates that His promises can

be trusted, even if man's promises cannot. What a glorious God we have!

And finally God is not mentioned because it emphasizes the human perspective that the presence of God has left the Jews who remained behind. As the events of the story unfold, it more and more seems God has left and the Jews are about to be destroyed. But, the truth is that God is still present. He is always present.

We have the perspective of looking back in time almost 2,500 years. As we read Esther we can take the long view and see the complete story, including the more than 500 year history of animosity between Israel and the Agagites. We can see that not only has God not left, He is orchestrating and bringing about the events in Persian to reveal his nature and character. He demonstrates that He never forgets, He can be trusted, He is in control, and He is a saving God. He saved the Jews. He saved Esther. And He will save us.

CHAPTER 35

THE TRUE PRESENCE OF GOD

Today many people are believing a lie about the presence of God. They believe that God is within them and they can experience the god within through practices such as contemplative prayer. Or they can hear the god within them speak by silencing their thoughts, or by whispering repetitive prayers.

Others are trying physical means to reach god. Practices such as Yoga may be seem to be for physical benefits, but these practices are ways to experience unity with god. (Yoga is the Hindi word for “unity” and is the foundation practice of the Hindu religion.)

All of these types of practices (contemplative prayer, silence, repetitive prayer, yoga, etc.) come from Eastern religions, mainly Hinduism. They are not Christian and they are not Biblical.

God is not a presence within us. Yes, the Holy Spirit dwells within all believers, but we do not look within ourselves to find the Holy Spirit.

The book of Esther shows us what the presence of God is like. It is God working with us, and within

us, and without us. In Esther we see the hand of God in multiple ways. But, there is never anything to indicate God is within us. What we see is a sovereign God, who exists separate from us, working throughout all of history to bring about His desired purpose. What is that purpose? That God be glorified. He is glorified by sin being defeated, and those who do not deserve it (us) being saved.

God is a saving God. In Esther we see Him saving Israel. There is no doubt that Israel is saved by God. Too many impossible things happen in the book of Esther for any other explanation to be reasonable.

We see that God is a saving God throughout scripture, both the Old and New Testament. For example, when Mary, the mother of Jesus, learns she is pregnant, she praises her saving God.

My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. – Luke 1:46

Mary knew God as her Savior. At that time there was only the Old Testament. She lived under Mosaic Law, yet she knew God as her Savior.

We have a saving God. When Jesus Christ was born, what did the angel tell the shepherds?

Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. – Luke 2:10-11

“There has been born for you a Savior.” Why do we need a Savior? What are we being saved from?

THE TRUE PRESENCE OF GOD

We need to be saved from God. Does that sound a little strange? It shouldn't. We've broken God's laws and He will enforce the just punishment for breaking His laws.

"*But, I'm a good person!*" you say? Are you really? How many lies have you told? Have you ever taken something that does not belong to you? Have you ever looked at another person with lust? Jesus said in Matthew chapter 5:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery"; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. – Matthew 5:27-28

If you have looked at anyone else with lust, you are guilty of committing adultery in your heart... and God looks at your heart.

These are just three of the Ten Commandments. If you have broken any of God's laws, and we all have, you are a law breaker deserving of God's just punishment... eternity in the lake of fire (Revelation 21:8).

Imagine this: What if I put a high capacity SD card into your head and recorded all of your thoughts for a month. Then I invite all of your friends and family, and we show it on the big screen. How would you feel about that? God sees your thoughts. He sees lust as adultery. He sees anger as being the same as murder (Matthew 5:21-22).

But our God is a saving God! When He died on the cross 2000 years ago He took the full punishment for every law you've broken. He was innocent, and He took all of your sin (law breaking) and paid the penalty in full. If you repent (turn away from sin), and trust this

is true, you get salvation as a free gift. But, if you reject Jesus' gift, you must pay the penalty for breaking God's laws yourself—eternity in the lake of fire.

We have a saving God. But, salvation is only available to those who actually believe it is true. How do you know it is true?

Because, Jesus rose from the dead. On the third day the tomb was empty and Jesus was alive. He rose, showing us there truly is life after death. Life that we can have, if you repent and turn to Jesus Christ as your Savior.

We have a saving God. Do you understand what else this means? You have to have the right Jesus. Anyone can create a "Jesus" in their imagination, and worship that Jesus. But an imaginary Jesus has no power to save. Jesus said:

And then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. – Matthew 13:21-22

Be sure your God is the true God. Be sure your "Jesus" is the true Jesus. Don't be looking for God within you. Don't be looking for God in other books such as the Book of Mormon or the Qur'an. You'll find the true God in one place only... in the Holy Bible... in books like Esther.

NOTES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Steve Hudgik served as the pastor of the Cannon Beach Bible Church, in Cannon Beach, Oregon from 2013 until September 2018, and then as an associate pastor until October 2019.

Steve has been the executive director of the Move to Assurance (MTA) ministry since 2000. MTA is involved in evangelism, outreach, and apologetics ministries. Some of the MTA web sites include:

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**Other books by Steve Hudgik
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