

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Bible Reading Fellowship
By Theresa Newell

August 2005

Read Esther Chapter 1

The King's Feast and a Wife's Defiance

The stories of Joseph, Ruth, Nehemiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Esther are stories of the people of Israel in exile. There is pathos in each of them. God had given the land of Israel to the Jewish people in His promise to Abraham (Genesis 15: 18, 19). To be outside the Land posed a threat to God's redemptive plan. How could the Messiah come and save His people and fulfill the promises of Scripture if the people of God were away from their Land?

The story of Esther is set farther away from Jerusalem than any of those who had gone into exile. Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king in Babylon; Esther was miles to the East of Babylon in the capital city of Persia, Susa – today's Iran. Neither the name of God nor Jerusalem appears in *Esther*. From this farthest point, the lives of all the Jews of the earth are threatened with annihilation by an imperial decree from the most powerful man on earth, the King of Persia.

Have you ever been so far away from family and friends and the "center" of your own connections that you thought that God had forgotten you? That you were too far from His presence to be thought of by Him much less found by Him?

The Jewish people in Persia were in a similar position. At the time King Ahasuerus (Greek, Xerxes) was a billionaire whose entertainment for "his nobles and officials . . . and military leaders" (v. 3) was excessive in quality and quantity. In this first

chapter, we read about the 180 days of feasting followed by an additional seven day “garden party” that he gave for the local leaders. In fact, this book is filled with banquets and feasts – and a most important fast!

The dilemma comes when the king sends for his wife, Queen Vashti, to come to his banquet on the last day of the feast. She refuses! Fearing that all men of the kingdom will lose power over their wives if the story gets out, Ahasuerus’s advisors suggests that he issue a “royal decree” be sent to the whole kingdom banishing Vashti from his presence. So the decree went out “proclaiming . . . that every man should be ruler over his own household” (v. 22).

One can see humor in this book, even if it is sometimes dark humor. How much power could the most powerful man on earth have if even his wife didn’t obey him? If he didn’t want this fact known, why advertise it to the entire kingdom by a decree? Couldn’t this most powerful and wealthy man make decisions on his own (note the seven eunuchs and seven advisors in this chapter who surround the king)?

After his drinking bout, this king woke up to a problem he had created for himself: The Queen’s chair was empty and would need to be filled.

R&D: When you have been far from family and friends and God, did you wonder if God’s plans for your life would ever get back on track? When you saw people in power have total control over people’s lives, as Ahasueras did, were you frightened? Was it difficult for you to see that God is the real “power” in such a time?

Prayer: Lord, in times when I feel that you are far away, help me to remember that you are always near me. When people seem to control my life, help me to know that You are sovereign over all things and that You are fulfilling Your plan for my life.

Read Chapter 2: 1-18

Meet Esther and Mordecai

On the advice of his personal servants (the Hebrew word is *na'arim* or “young men” not the older advisors of 1:13), the King sends out another decree to the kingdom: find “beautiful young virgins” for his harem and let the King choose Vashti’s successor as Queen.

We are now introduced to the Jewish family who will be the center of the remainder of the story: Mordecai and Esther. Esther’s deceased father was Mordecai’s uncle. Mordecai had taken his younger cousin Esther into his family as a daughter. She has two names: Esther’s Jewish name is Hadassah (meaning “myrtle”), but she is known by the Persian name Esther (“star”). The name may be derived from the Babylonian goddess Ishtar called “The Queen of Heaven” (see Jeremiah 7:18).

Esther is a hostage in multiple ways: an exile, she is taken into the King’s harem and must hide her Jewish identity on advice from Mordecai. She must live in two worlds: Jewish and a Persian harem. One can hardly imagine a greater dichotomy! She is given favor with the eunuch Hegai who was in charge of the harem (v. 9), “everyone who saw her” (v. 15), and finally, the king himself (v. 17). Ahasuerus made Esther the queen and gave a great banquet in her honor (vv. 17-18).

Even in times and in circumstances that are inscrutable to us, God is working out his purposes in our lives. Esther and Mordecai were swept up in the currents of the vortex of the all-powerful Persian king. Christians today are often caught “behind the lines” where godless and powerful dictators rule. More Christians have died for their faith in the last century than in all of Church history, I have been told. Our brothers and sisters in such circumstances may have felt as Esther and Mordecai did in their day: they did not have control of their own lives. But God was working out his purposes, both for them and for His people in the midst of such isolation and exile.

R&D: Have you been in a place where you have felt “out of control” for decisions that have been made in your life? What was your reaction and how did you feel at such a time? Does the story of Esther and Mordecai bring you comfort from the Word of God as you think of that time or perhaps a situation in which you now find yourself?

Prayer: O Lord, how wonderful are Your ways. How marvelous is Your plan of redemption for your people and the world. Thank you that I am not left alone and without an anchor of hope in this world. Comfort our brothers and sisters who are suffering today for their faith in Jesus.

Read Esther 2:19 to 3:15

The Plot to Kill the Jews

After Esther became queen, Mordecai “was sitting at the king’s gate” (2:19) to get news of her well-being each day. While there, Mordecai heard two royal officers plot to assassinate King Ahasuerus. He reported the plan to Esther who told the king. The

plotters were hung, and the matter was duly recorded in the king's annals and forgotten – for the time being.

In movies we watch, there is usually a “bad guy.” Chapter 3 introduces us to that person in the story of Esther: Haman the Agagite. Ahasuerus shows bad judgment by choosing Haman and giving him “a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles” (3:1). We want to ask: What is it with this King? Doesn't he know you don't choose the guy wearing the black hat to be your leader?

Mordecai's family tree includes the tribe of Benjamin, the clan of Israel's first king, Saul. Haman, an Agagite (3:1), traces his family to King Agag, the Amalekite (1 Samuel 15:20). Because the Amalekites had attacked Israel when they left Egypt, the Lord had sworn that He would “be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation” (Exodus 17:16). Five hundred years later in Persia, the battle between the Benjamites (Mordecai) and the Amalekites (Haman) continues.

Sometimes God seems to be silent for a long time, but not forever. His judgments are sure, and they will come to pass in His perfect time. Jesus' death on the cross seemed an obvious defeat by the enemy, but God raised him from the dead and death no longer has victory over the people of God! How silent God seemed to be on Good Friday but how He shouted on Easter Sunday when He called Jesus from the grave!

When Haman went in and out of the king's gate, the officials knelt before him, but Mordecai would not pay him honor. Haman was outraged and, learning that Mordecai was a Jew, determined to kill not just Mordecai but “the Jews throughout the whole kingdom” (3:6).

Evil moves quickly in its path to destruction. Without checking with the king, Haman loses no time to cast the *pur* – a kind of roll of dice – to determine the month and day for his intended genocide of God’s people. Having picked the 13th day of the 12th month, Adar (about March), Haman lies in making his case to the king about why “a certain people” in his kingdom should be annihilated: their customs are different; they do not obey the king’s orders; the king’s best interest is not being served by their presence (3:8).

Without investigating the charges for himself, King Ahasuerus gives his signet ring to seal the decree to “Haman . . . the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews” (3:10) calling for death to all the Jews of the kingdom.

R&D: Are there times when you feel the “bad guys” are winning in your life? Have you taken this feeling to the Cross of Jesus and thought about what a defeat his death seemed to be on that dark Friday? Can you think of an instance in your life when “resurrection” has come from a bad situation?

Prayer: Dear Father, give me faith to see You when all seems dark. Let that faith extend to your greater purposes in the world. Thank you that You are a God of surprising turn-arounds in our lives and in the life of your people.

Read Esther 4: 1-17

For Such a Time as This

Mordecai may have realized that it was his refusal to bow to Haman that has now brought a decree of genocide to all his Jewish people. While Haman and the king calmly

relaxed over a drink as the decree goes out (3:15), Mordecai's anguish cannot be assuaged. Publicly, he demonstrates his grief and despair by tearing his clothes, putting on sackcloth and ashes, "wailing loudly and bitterly" (v. 1).

Ironically, while the whole world was getting the word about the dreadful decree, those inside the palace seemed to know nothing of it. Esther sends out clothes for Mordecai and then a messenger to learn what is causing his behavior. Mordecai sends a copy of the edict by the messenger to inform the sequestered Esther with a plea to her: "go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for *her* people" (v. 8). Where Mordecai had instructed Esther to hide her Jewishness, now he says, you must reveal yourself and know that you will also be killed along with all the other Jews. We can only imagine Esther's shock and confusion. Thoughts of the fate of Vashti at the hands of this king may have flashed through her mind. Ironically, Vashti was banished because she refused to go to the king; Esther fears that she will be killed if she does go to him!

Esther makes a decision to lay her life on the line and to go, unbidden, before the king. "If I perish, I perish" (v. 16). Esther called on the help of the community in Susa: fast with me and my maids for three days, then I will go to the king. Now it is Mordecai who is taking orders from Esther (v. 17)! She has made a choice that put not only her life in jeopardy, but she now carries the full weight, responsibility and fate of her people on her royal shoulders.

Character is formed in the crucible. Our daughter Laura faced a diagnosis of breast cancer over a year ago. After a year of surgeries, chemo and radiation, she and her husband Brian said that they now look at life, their children and their walk with Jesus in a

totally different way than before the diagnosis. They, like Esther, called on their faith community to pray and fast with them. They showed great strength by His grace during that year. Facing death changes life forever.

R&D: Have you or someone close to you faced death? What has been your/their response? Did you/they grow in character and strength? Did you/they depend on the prayers of others? Have you/they changed as a result of the challenge that illness or business failure or family dilemmas brought?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you that the Word says that by your death you destroyed him “who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Hebrews 2:14-15). Even if I face death, cause me to be free to worship you and to allow your Holy Spirit to strengthen my character and to form Jesus in me.

Read Esther 5: 1-15

Esther before the King and Haman’s Rage

I am preparing to be part of a street evangelism team taking the Gospel to Jewish people as I write this devotional. I have worked in Jewish evangelism for almost 30 years. When I ask my intercessors to go before the throne of grace with me for God to give me boldness in proclaiming Jesus as Messiah to the Jewish people, the enemy is not happy. This summer we have had a string of illnesses in our family: one uncle who suffered a near-fatal fall, a son who was diagnosed with Lyme’s Disease, a grandson who could have been seriously hurt in a fall from a 4-wheeler, the recurrence of stomach

problems by a daughter. Gospel ministry seems to invite the rage of the already-defeated enemy. But we must not be afraid, for he is with us (Matthew 28: 20).

Not satisfied with his second-to-none position in the Kingdom, Haman plots the ruin of Mordecai. This is done at the instigation of Haman's wife, sons and friends. Jesus said that "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12: 34). Haman's family and friends reveal that their anti-Semitism matches Haman's. Again, the size of the gallows they propose to build on which to hang Mordecai (equal to a six-story building!) is a clownish exaggeration. Evil knows no bounds and often overshoots itself. The macabre thought of the over-sized gallows gives Haman's dark heart an eerie satisfaction.

While Haman plots death, Esther and her maids and the Jews of Susa have been fasting and praying for three-days. She approaches the King's court, unbidden, in her royal robes. Esther has found a godly confidence, a new authority as queen following her fasting and prayer. I think that Esther reflects the Church in her role as intercessor. We are the bride of Christ and he invites us, unlike the frightening Persian king, to make our needs known to him. His royal scepter is always extended toward us for "he always lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:25). The king, for the first time in the book, acknowledges her as "Queen Esther" (v. 3).

The king and Haman respond positively to Esther's invitation to her banquet. From this point, Esther is in charge of the action of the story. Why she delayed telling the king until the next day's banquet what was on her heart, no one is sure. But by identifying herself as one of the covenant people of God, she has found her true identity and strength. Once we have found ourselves "in Christ" our identity is sure. We can

move in his strength and power by the Holy Spirit. We figuratively put on our royal robes and command the powers of the enemy that lurk about us. We stand beside our King with his authority (Matthew 28: 18). We go forth to make disciples because he is always with us!

R&D: When you enter into intercession before God's throne of grace, do you go with the confidence that Jesus has given you? Have you identified with him through the power of the Holy Spirit? Even when the enemy comes against me, do you obey the command of Jesus to "go and make disciples"? Have you found fasting/prayer helpful?

Prayer: Come Holy Spirit and make me the man or woman who lives in the strength of my identity "in Christ." Take away all fear. Cause me to put on the mantle of spiritual authority not in my strength but in Christ's to be a bold witness of the Good News of Jesus to the world around me.

Read Esther 6: 1-11

The King's Sleepless Night

Sometimes when we least expect it, God is there. When things look their worst, in ways we could never imagine, God intervenes. Recently a son-in-law was told he surely had a blood clot in his leg, a life-threatening diagnosis. Tests were done and, against the doctor's prognosis, came back negative. Two days later the swelling in his calf was gone and he was back to normal. We had prayed fervent prayers. Was this God's intervention? A woman's son was diagnosed with a fatal cancerous tumor recently. The church prayed. The tumor disappeared. The doctor wrote on his chart: this is a miracle.

In our story, the miracle begins with insomnia! The King cannot sleep and decides that he should have the royal annals read to him, perhaps thinking that something so boring would put him right back to sleep! Where did the royal chamberlain open to? The story of Mordecai revealing the plot that saved the king's life (2:19-23)! Such a coincidence!!

Instead of putting the king to sleep, the idea that this man had gone unrewarded for such a great deed that preserved the king's life energized Ahasuerus to full wakefulness. And who should be wandering near the royal chambers at the crack of dawn with dastardly thoughts toward this same Mordecai but our "bad guy" Haman. Haman's agenda was to tell the king that he was going to hang Mordecai that morning, but "he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:4) trumped Haman's plan by giving the King a divine wake-up call at 2 AM.

It is humorous for the reader who knows what is in the mind of both the King and Haman to hear the dialogue. "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" the king asks his egocentric minister. Of course, this must be ME, thinks Haman. His answer reveals his heart. He doesn't ask for "half the kingdom" as the king had offered to Esther the day before: he wants it ALL – he wants to be king! He wants his robes of authority, his horse, his honor, his acclaim by all the subjects of the realm. The enemy of God wants to BE God!

Can you imagine the face of Haman when the King tells him to put "Mordecai the Jew" (v. 10) on his horse and honor him in this way? Dramatically, we see the tables turn from dishonor to the Jewish people to great honor. From death to honor – at the order of the King!

R&D: Paul wrote: “Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him [Jesus], for we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one a smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life” (2 Corinthians 2: 14, 15). Do you believe that the God of Jesus the Messiah is sleeping when your needs are before Him? Do you walk as His “aroma” to a dying world?

Prayer: Father, thank you for loving me and for watching over me, day and night. Thank you that you call us “the aroma of Christ.” Help me to walk this day in the knowledge of this thought that is so amazing and wonderful, to Your glory. Amen.

Read Esther 7: 1-10

The Second Banquet

One woman (Zeresh) predicts that her husband Haman “will surely come to ruin” (6:13); another woman (Esther) brings it to pass. Haman has literally given himself enough rope with which to hang himself. The quick movement at this point of the story gives the reader a sense of the enemy’s rush to ruin, and yet the chapter begins with a second sumptuous banquet where the wine is again flowing and there is a sense of leisure (1:7, 8).

God’s timing is always right, and Esther has discerned well for her wait has given God time to awaken the king and reveal Mordecai’s good deed to him. Have you sometimes wondered why God has you wait when you want to move quickly in an important situation?

When the king, mellowed with food and wine, asks a second time, “Queen Esther, what is your petition?” she is prepared to make her best case: “Save me and save my people.” The king had no idea Esther was in need of saving nor who her people were! While he is reeling from this plea, she adds, quoting exactly from Haman’s decree against the Jews (3:13), “I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation” (v. 4).

Enraged, the king shouts: “Who is the man?” Esther extends her royal finger toward the king’s prime minister and answers, “This vile Haman.” The king storms out of the banquet room into the garden perhaps to clear his head from the wine and put the Queen’s shocking declarations into perspective. At the same time, desperately and against all harem protocol, villainous Haman throws himself on the Queen begging for her mercy only to have the king return at just that moment. Giving his only direct order in the entire book, Ahasuerus commands: “Hang him!” on the gallows he prepared for Mordecai!

Esther’s intervention ended the work of the Agagite Haman the heir of the Amalakites that King Saul had backed away from destroying many years before (See 1 Samuel 15: 7-9). Saul lost his kingship because of his disobedience; Esther kept her crown and saved her people as a result of her obedience.

Esther took a courageous stand, identified with the People of God, counted her life as lost, prayed and fasted, did her homework, waited on God, and God did what only He can do: save his people from the “adversary and the enemy” (v. 6). Likewise, we are encouraged by the Holy Spirit to be courageous in times of trial, to take up our cross daily and follow Jesus. The circumstances of our life call for prayer and fasting and for

diligent seeking of God for His timing in crucial situations for ourselves, our families, and our sisters and brothers in Christ worldwide. We must be committed to radical obedience to our Lord. May we walk in the royal status that our King Jesus has won for us as his Bride and, like Esther, meet the moment with confidence in God to deliver.

R&D: Jesus described our enemy as “The thief [who] comes only to steal and kill and destroy” but he has “come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). Have you committed your life to that Good Shepherd of your soul who gives life eternal? Do you believe in the reality of Evil? Have you experienced God’s overcoming power against that Evil in your life?

Prayer: Thank you, Father, for the power you have given us through the Holy Spirit and the Blood of Jesus our Savior and Lord. Give me the courage to obey You radically today and to speak the truth in love and to not be afraid because You are with me always!

Read Esther 8: 1-17

The Second Decree

In 1933, a renowned German theologian addressed “the Jewish question.” He wrote: “The Jewish question is absolutely not a question of individual Jews but a question of Jewry, the Jewish *Volk*. And, therefore, whoever wants to get to the root of the question may not first ask what shall become of the individual Jew, but what shall

become of Jewry.”¹ This scholar sought to justify Hitler’s edict against the Jews of modern Germany.

The spirit of Haman that drove him to hatred against one Jew, Mordecai, and then to the desire to exterminate every Jew played out again in the 20th century under Hitler’s Third Reich and its agenda to rid the world of the Jewish people. Sadly, many in the Church joined Hitler’s Social Democrats and their program. Gratefully, the extermination plan did not totally succeed though almost half of the Jewish population died. The Holocaust will be long remembered in all its horror. Today over 15 million Jewish people are alive, most of them living in the United States. In my work in taking the Gospel in a sensitive and loving way to Jewish people, I spend much time preparing the Church to do the same. This means teaching about the history and culture of the Jewish people to whom we go. Much of that history is the history of survival – from the Egyptian pharaoh to Haman until today.

Even after Haman is hanged, the “Jewish question” is not solved in Persia because the king’s edict could not be revoked. Evil’s effects and the resultant tension remain. Tears once again fill the eyes of Esther as she pleads for her people’s lives. A huge power shift does take effect, however. The king gives Esther Haman’s estate and holdings, Mordecai is named Prime Minister in Haman’s place, and the king gives permission to send a second decree to the entire world. The decree says that on the same day that the Jews were to have been annihilated, they now have permission to defend themselves.

God is a God of second chances, we often say. We have all experienced the amazing grace of God, knowing ourselves to be miserable sinners doomed to eternal destruction. “But God...” is my favorite phrase in the Bible. He came and saved me. He

¹ Robert P. Ericksen. Theologians Under Hitler. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985: 55.

loved me before I knew or loved Him. His mercy endures forever! Esther and Mordecai and all of God's people get a second chance through the great reversal that follows Haman's death.

From the citadel of Susa riders went from "India to Cush" (v. 9) to announce a royal reprieve for the Jewish people. Many people in those 127 provinces had already begun to persecute their Jewish neighbors, perhaps taking their jobs, their homes or even their wives and children. After all, they were a doomed people by the irrevocable decree of the king (see 9:1).

God's decree is mightier than all the kings' of this world: "Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel" (Jeremiah 31: 37). Today in Israel, people sing: *Am Yisrael Chai* – the people of Israel live!

Like the Jews in the ancient Persian Empire, we can rejoice because God loved this world so much He sent his own son to set us free from the enemy of our souls and to buy us back with His own blood. Being found in Christ, we, like those Jews of old, have "joy and gladness . . . feasting and celebration" (v. 17).

R&D: Have you thanked God today and rejoiced in Him for giving you a "second chance"? When did God find you and give you that second chance for life? Have you thanked the people He used to bring you the Good News?

Prayer: Your Word says: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentiles" (Romans 1: 16). Lord, make me today an instrument for bringing the gospel to

another person, Jew or Gentile. Lord, send your Holy Spirit to open their hearts to your Good News.

Read Esther 9 and 10

The Feast of Purim

The Scroll of Esther (there are five books of the Hebrew Bible which are called *megillot* or scrolls – Ruth, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther) is best read at a single sitting and with a sense of humor. Considered a minor feast in the Jewish liturgical year, Purim (meaning “lots” in remembrance of the *pur* consulted by Haman to determine the day of the destruction of the Jews) is celebrated with great festivities both in Israel and in the Diaspora (the areas of the world where Jews live outside of Israel, a kind of exile itself).

At a Purim party, the girls dress as Queen Esther and the boys as the hero Mordecai. As the Scroll is read, each time the “villain” Haman’s name is mentioned, noisemakers are shaken loudly, symbolizing the drowning out of the Amalakites, those perennial enemies of God and His people. Boos and hisses are added, just as in the days of the silent movies when the dastardly man with the black hat appeared swishing his dark cape across his mustachioed face. In contrast, Mordecai’s name is, of course, greeted with applause and cheers.

God, whose name does not appear in this Scroll, has been there all along! The psalmist acknowledges:

“If the LORD had not been on our side – let Israel say –
If the LORD had not been on our side
when men attacked us,
when their anger flared against us,

they would have swallowed us alive
Praise be to the LORD,
Who has not let us be torn by their teeth,
We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare;
The snare has been broken and we have escaped.
Our help is in the name of the LORD,
The Maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 124: 1-3, 6-8)

When the Shah of Iran fell from power in 1979, there were still 75,000 Jewish people living there, remnants of those millennia ago when the God of Israel stood in the background and, through his daughter, Esther, saved His people Israel. His faithfulness is to the clouds! Out of the covenant people came the Messiah Jesus, the true King of the Jews (the sign that hung over his thorn-crowned head on the cross). God will not forever be silent. His judgments are sure. Wait ye upon the Lord!

R&D: Have you had an experience of waiting on the Lord when all seemed lost? Has reading the Scroll of Esther helped you find a stronger faith to know that, even when He is not felt or obviously present, God is with you always?

Prayer: Our mouths are full of praise for You, O God, the King of the Universe and Lord of the lords of this earth. For you alone are holy and worth of our praise and our complete love and obedience. Thank you for showing us through the story of Esther that you are the Savior of Your people. Amen.

I am indebted to the following authors for their commentaries and insights into the book of Esther. You may want to read more about this most interesting book yourselves!

Baldwin, Joyce G. Esther: An Introduction & Commentary. Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1984.

Bechtel, Carol M. Esther: Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox, 1989.

Jobes, Karen H. The NIV Application Commentary: Esther. Grand Rapids: Zonderban, 1999.

Levenson, Jon D. Esther: A Commentary. Louisville: Westminster, 1997.