

Lesson 4 Commentary

Day 7: Esther in the Persian Court

Esther 1–2

The books of Ruth and Esther both illustrate important biblical principles. The book of Ruth illustrates God's redemption. The book of Esther illustrates God's providence.

The book of Esther tells the story of Jewish exiles in Persia. They lived there during the reign of King Ahasuerus. (Some translations call him by his Persian name, Xerxes.) At that time, the Persian court placed close to 15 million Jews in danger. God rescued the Jews through a young orphan named Esther. God used ordinary people to accomplish His plans. Today Jews celebrate this miracle during the Festival of Purim.

Esther is the only book of the Bible that never mentions God. Yet we see God's providence throughout the story. The fact that the Jews survived in the Persian Empire and through the ages is a tribute to God's absolute power over all. God takes care of His people and carries out His good plans. We can all be encouraged by His sovereign care for us.

The Royal Banquet in Susa

The Persian Empire was large. It extended from the Indus River in India to the upper Nile region of Egypt. The city of Susa, located in the modern nation of Iran, was King Ahasuerus's winter capital. Ahasuerus had followed his father, Darius, as king. For six months, He put his royal riches on display for all his nobles and governors to see. It seems that Ahasuerus was rallying support for his military invasion of Greece.

At the end of six months, he invited all the people of Susa to a seven-day banquet. Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women. On the seventh day of feasting, Ahasuerus wanted to show off beautiful Queen Vashti. He asked her to come to his banquet wearing her royal crown. But she refused the king's request and he was "enraged."

The king usually surrounded himself with men who were experts in the law. These "*wise men*" made Vashti's refusal into a national crisis. They persuaded Ahasuerus that Vashti was now a bad example. Husbands everywhere would be disrespected. So the king deposed Vashti. He also issued a decree that all women were to respect their husbands.

Esther Chosen as Queen

"After these things" suggests that a number of years had passed. We know from history that Ahasuerus fought against the Greeks from 482 to 479 BC. The events of chapter 2 may have taken place after this military failure. As Ahasuerus returned to Persia, he remembered Vashti. Perhaps he felt sadness and regret. His young personal attendants wanted to keep the king happy, so they proposed a plan to select a new queen. Ahasuerus was pleased with their idea. He appointed officers in every province to search for "beautiful young virgins."

A Jew named Mordecai, from the tribe of Benjamin, lived in Susa. His ancestors had come from Jerusalem. The Jews had been exiled to Babylon in 597 BC (2 Kings 24:8-17), and many had continued to live in Persia a century later. Mordecai took care of his young orphaned cousin. Her Hebrew name was Hadassah (meaning "myrtle"). Later she was known as Esther (a Persian name meaning "*star*," or "*Ishtar*," the Babylonian goddess of love). Jewish exiles often had Babylonian or, later, Persian names as well as Hebrew names.

Officers searched the city for beautiful girls to supply the royal harem. Since Mordecai lived in the citadel of Susa, he could not hide Esther. It was not long until she was taken to the eunuch in charge of the harem. Immediately Esther became his favorite. He assigned seven maids to her. He provided her with cosmetics and food, and gave her "*the best place in the harem.*" Mordecai was concerned for Esther's welfare. He spent a lot of time in the harem courtyard. He cautioned Esther not to reveal her family identity or nationality. As we will learn later in this study, not everyone in Persia thought well of the Jews.



Think about making hard decisions. Should Esther have agreed to enter the king's harem? Scholars questioned Esther's morality because she allowed herself to conform to Persian court life. But Esther had to make very hard choices under very difficult circumstances. The Bible neither condemns nor condones her decision. Instead, it shows God's power and willingness to work in her difficult situation. He used her circumstances to bring good not only for her, but for all the Jews in Persia. Esther illustrates how God reaches to us where we are. He can redeem any situation for our good and His glory.

The beautiful virgins were given beauty treatments. Esther completed the beauty treatments in 12 months. In those days, Persia, India, and Arabia were known for their perfumes. They were exported to other countries and used lavishly at home. Archaeologists have found cosmetic burners used to infuse the skin and hair with the fumes from aromatic spices.

When Esther was presented to the king, "she won grace and favor in his sight." He was so pleased with Esther that he chose her to replace Vashti. Ahasuerus gave a great banquet. Esther was presented as the queen of Persia before his nobles and officials.



Think about the rest of the young women whom the king did not choose. Likely they were no longer virgins and were now living in the "second harem." They were kept in the king's harem as concubines. But the majority of them would never be summoned by the king again. They would spend their lives separated from their families. Normal relationships with any other men were forbidden. They were doomed to a life of virtual widowhood.

Mordecai Uncovers a Plot

Meanwhile, Mordecai apparently had gained some degree of political authority. Perhaps through Esther's influence he was appointed as a magistrate or judge. In 2:19 we find him sitting at the king's gate. Throughout the ancient Near East, officials, judges, and magistrates met inside these large gates to conduct business and government affairs.

Mordecai learned of a plot to kill the king. He reported it to Esther, who in turn informed King Ahasuerus. More than one ruler had been killed by his own servants. Fourteen years later a similar plot against Ahasuerus was successful. Mordecai's report was investigated. The guilty officers were promptly hanged. Mordecai was credited in the royal archives with uncovering this conspiracy and saving the king's life.



Personalize the TRUTH!

Esther probably would not have chosen to leave her uncle's family and enter the pagan king's harem. However, after being forced to go there, she demonstrated maturity, humility, and good sense. Like Esther, we face situations we would not choose, but we can control our responses to them. Where do circumstances have you these days? Are you fearful? Discouraged? Frustrated? Without hope? Tell God how you feel. Remind Him—and yourself—that He loves to work in the most unlikely situations. Ask Him to help you be gracious and humble when you face a difficult situation. Ask God to help you trust Him for the good He is going to do. Then watch and listen for signs of what He's up to so you can join Him in it, as Esther did.
