

Esther

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a. **Time & Place**

- b. Time: About 485 BC, during Israel's return from Babylon [Iraq]
c. Place: City of Susa, in Persia [Iran] *See map with student guide.*
d. Emperor: Xerxes - not a nice fellow.

e. **Queen Vashti deposed (Esther 1)**

To introduce the study, everyone in the group should read Esther 1:1-11.

¹ *This is what happened during the time of King Xerxes, the king who ruled the one hundred twenty-seven states from India to Cush [Ethiopia].* ² *In those days King Xerxes ruled from his capital city of Susa.*

³ *In the third year of his rule, he gave a banquet for all his important men and royal officers... The army leaders from the countries of Persia and Media and the important men from all Xerxes' empire were there.*

⁴ *The banquet lasted one hundred eighty days. All during that time King Xerxes was showing off the great wealth of his kingdom and his own great riches and glory.*

⁵ *When the one hundred eighty days were over, the king gave another banquet. It was held in the courtyard of the palace garden for seven days, and it was for everybody in the palace at Susa, from the greatest to the least....* ⁷ *Wine was served in gold cups of various kinds. And there was plenty of the king's wine, because he was very generous.* ⁸ *The king commanded that the guests be permitted to drink as much as they wished. He told the wine servers to serve each person what he wanted.*

⁹ *Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.*

¹⁰ *On the seventh day of the banquet, King Xerxes was very happy, because he had been drinking much wine. He gave a command... to bring him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown. She was to come to show her beauty to the people and important men, because she was very beautiful.* ¹² *... but she refused to come.*

f. Why did Xerxes ask Vashti to come to his party?

¹¹ *...She was to come to show her beauty to the people and important men, because she was very beautiful.*

g. Why did Vashti refuse?

The Bible does not give her reason. Members of the group can offer their ideas.

The best guess is that Xerxes' command did not show respect for his queen. The Bible says that King Xerxes was very drunk. If he had been sober, he would not have given that command.

However, in that culture, the king's word was absolute law, and *any* disobedience by *anyone*, including the queen, could earn the death penalty. Queen Vashti knew that. This makes us wonder... Was Queen Vashti as drunk as Xerxes -- and she was in no mood to leave her party?

h. Why did Xerxes' advisors recommend deposing her?

¹⁷ *"...All the wives of the important men of Persia and Media will hear about the queen's actions. Then they will no longer honor their husbands..."*¹⁸ *...So they will speak in the same way to their husbands, and there will be no end to disrespect and anger.*

¹⁹ *"So, our king, if it pleases you, give a royal order, and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be changed. The law should say Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her place as queen to someone who is better than she is."*²⁰ *And let the king's order be announced everywhere in his enormous kingdom. Then all the women will respect their husbands, from the greatest to the least."*

²¹ *The king and his important men were happy with this advice, so King Xerxes did as Memucan suggested.*²² *He sent letters to all the states of the kingdom in the writing of each state and in the language of each group of people. These letters announced that each man was to be the ruler of his own family.*

The King's advisors felt threatened by Vashti's independence. They wanted her punishment to serve as example to all women of the empire.

<p>When a law is written "<i>in the laws of Persia and Media</i>," the law is permanent. If the king later changes his mind -- too bad. Not even the king can change his own law. (See Daniel 6:10-16) That's a problem that comes up later in Esther's story.</p>
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i. **Esther chosen as queen (Esther 2:1-18)**

¹ *Later, when King Xerxes was not so angry, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and his order about her.*

Now that he was sober again, he regretted what he had done. So his advisors suggested that he hold a beauty contest to choose a new queen.

² Then the king's personal servants suggested, "Let a search be made for beautiful young girls for the king. ³ Let the king choose supervisors in every state of his kingdom to bring every beautiful young girl to the palace at Susa. They should be taken to the women's quarters and put under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch in charge of the women. And let beauty treatments be given to them. ⁴ Then let the girl who most pleases the king become queen in place of Vashti." The king liked this idea, so he did as they said.

Now meet the heroes of the story:

- j. What was Esther's real (Jewish) name? (v.7)
- k. What was her relationship to Mordecai?

⁵ Now there was a Jewish man in the palace of Susa whose name was Mordecai... Mordecai was from the tribe of Benjamin, ⁶ which had been taken captive from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. They were part of the group taken into captivity with Jehoiachin king of Judah. ⁷ Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, who had no father or mother, so Mordecai took care of her. Hadassah was also called Esther, and she had a very pretty figure and face. Mordecai had adopted her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

- l. What restriction had Mordecai giving Esther?

¹⁰ Esther did not tell anyone about her family or who her people were, because Mordecai had told her not to.

- m. How long was her training period?

(2:18) 12 months of "beauty treatments" with oils and perfumes. However, the women probably received more than just skin conditioning. It is safe to guess that they also received training on how to behave in the royal household and how to respond to the king.

It is worth noting that Esther received special attention from her trainer (2:9). It was not just her physical beauty, but her inner character, which made Esther especially appealing.

- n. How was she chosen as queen?

All the women in this program were automatically in Xerxes harem. Only one could become queen, but all of them became his concubines.

¹² Before a girl could take her turn with King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments... ¹³ Then she was ready to go to the king.

Anything she asked for was given to her to take with her from the women's quarters to the king's palace.¹⁴ In the evening she would go to the king's palace, and in the morning she would return to another part of the women's quarters... The girl would not go back to the king again unless he was pleased with her and asked for her by name.

Obviously, the test for every girl in the program included having sex with King Xerxes. That included Esther.

¹⁷ And the king was pleased with Esther more than with any of the other girls. He liked her more than any of the other girls, so he put a royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti.

o. Mordecai saves Xerxes' life (Esther 2:21-23)

The plot of the story shifts away from Esther, and focuses on her cousin, Mordecai.

²¹ Now Bigthana and Teresh were two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway. While Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, they became angry and began to make plans to kill King Xerxes.²² But Mordecai found out about their plans and told Queen Esther. Then Esther told the king how Mordecai had discovered the evil plan.²³ When the report was investigated, it was found to be true, and the two officers who had planned to kill the king were hanged. All this was written down in the daily court record in the king's presence.

That episode becomes important later in the story.

p. Haman's scheme (Esther 3)

q. Who was Haman?

¹ After these things happened, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite. He gave him a new rank that was higher than all the important men.

Today Haman's title might be "Prime Minister." 1000 years earlier, Joseph had a similar position with the Pharaoh of Egypt. He was the chief administrator.

r. Why did Haman hate the Jews?

² All the royal officers at the king's gate would bow down and kneel before Haman, as the king had ordered. But Mordecai would not bow down or show him honor.

Bowing and kneeling was a sign of worship. Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, because Mordecai the Jew would worship only God.

³ Then the royal officers at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why don't you obey the king's command?"⁴ And they said this to him every day. When he did not listen to them, they told Haman about it. They wanted to see if Haman would accept Mordecai's behavior because Mordecai had told them he was Jewish.

⁵ When Haman saw that Mordecai would not bow down to him or honor him, he became very angry.

s. What did he plan to do to Mordecai?

⁶ He thought of himself as too important to try to kill only Mordecai. He had been told who the people of Mordecai were, so he looked for a way to destroy all of Mordecai's people, the Jews, in all of Xerxes' kingdom.

⁸ Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain group of people scattered among the other people in all the states of your kingdom. Their customs are different from those of all the other people, and they do not obey the king's laws. It is not right for you to allow them to continue living in your kingdom."⁹ If it pleases the king, let an order be given to destroy those people."

King Xerxes trusted Haman, so the king gave Haman permission to write the order as the king's own law.

¹² On the thirteenth day of the first month, the royal secretaries were called, and they wrote out all of Haman's orders. They wrote to the king's governors and to the captains of the soldiers in each state and to the important men of each group of people. The orders were written in the writing of each state and in the language of each people. They were written in the name of King Xerxes and sealed with his signet ring.¹³ Letters were sent by messengers to all the king's empire ordering them to destroy, kill, and completely wipe out all the Jewish people. That meant young and old, women and little children, too. It was to happen on a single day—the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which was Adar. And they could take everything the Jewish people owned.

This was a terrible situation for all the Jews. Mordecai asked Esther to appeal to the King. But Esther was afraid to say anything to King Xerxes about it.

^{4:11} "...no man or woman may go to the king in the inner courtyard without being called. There is only one law about this: Anyone who enters must be put to death unless the king holds out his gold scepter. Then that person may live. And I have not been called to go to the king for thirty days."

Mordecai and Esther could not meet in person, so they wrote notes to each other, delivered by Esther's servants.

^{4:13} Then Mordecai sent back word to Esther: “Just because you live in the king’s palace, don’t think that out of all the Jewish people you alone will escape. ¹⁴ If you keep quiet at this time, someone else will help and save the Jewish people, but you and your father’s family will all die. And who knows, you may have been chosen queen for just such a time as this.”

¹⁵ Then Esther sent this answer to Mordecai: ¹⁶ “Go and get all the Jewish people in Susa together. For my sake, give up eating; do not eat or drink for three days, night and day. I and my servant girls will also give up eating. Then I will go to the king, even though it is against the law, and if I die, I die.”

t. **Esther's scheme (Esther 5-7)**

Esther waited three days, and then she dared to meet the king.

^{5:1} On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner courtyard of the king’s palace, facing the king’s hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the doorway. ² When the king saw Queen Esther standing in the courtyard, he was pleased. He held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand, so Esther went forward and touched the end of it.

³ The king asked, “What is it, Queen Esther? What do you want to ask me? I will give you as much as half of my kingdom.”

Now was her chance to tell the king about the problem. But she is too smart to do that. She makes him wait. She keeps him guessing.

^{5:4} Esther answered, “My king, if it pleases you, come today with Haman to a banquet that I have prepared for him.”

Esther's plan is to expose Haman as the evil man he really is. But not yet...

^{5:5} ...So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared for them. ⁶ As they were drinking wine, the king said to Esther, “Now, what are you asking for? I will give it to you. What is it you want? I will give you as much as half of my kingdom.”

⁷ Esther answered, “This is what I want and what I ask for. ⁸ My king, if you are pleased with me and if it pleases you, give me what I ask for and do what I want. Come with Haman tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for you. Then I will answer your question about what I want.”

Now the story shifts to Haman.

^{5:9} Haman left the king’s palace that day happy and content...

Haman thinks King Xerxes honors him. Haman thinks the Queen likes him. He enjoys his wealth, power, and the attention he is getting. But...

5:9 ...But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and saw that Mordecai did not stand up or tremble with fear before him, Haman became very angry with Mordecai. ¹⁰ But he controlled his anger and went home.

At home Haman complained about Mordecai.

5:14 Then Haman's wife, Zeresh, and all his friends said, "Have a seventy-five foot platform built, and in the morning ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go to the banquet with the king and be happy." Haman liked this suggestion, so he ordered the platform to be built.

u. Haman embarrassed four times in one day.

Now the stage is set for Haman's fall. God begins to answer the prayers of His people.

Embarrassment #1:

Read Esther 6 - the whole chapter.

Because of Haman's foolish pride, he is forced to show great honor to the man he hates most, Mordecai.

Embarrassment #2:

Read Esther 7:1-7.

The scene now shifts to back to Esther and her second banquet for Xerxes and Haman. Xerxes is now really curious about what Esther wants. He pressures her to tell him what is bothering her.

³ Then Queen Esther answered, "My king, if you are pleased with me, and if it pleases you, let me live. This is what I ask. And let my people live, too. This is what I want. ⁴ My people and I have been sold to be destroyed, to be killed and completely wiped out..."

⁵ Then King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he? Who has done such a thing?"

⁶ Esther said, "Our enemy and foe is this wicked Haman!"

Then Haman was filled with terror before the king and queen. ⁷ The king was very angry, so he got up, left his wine, and went out into the palace garden. But Haman stayed inside to beg Queen Esther to save his life. He could see that the king had already decided to kill him.

Embarrassment #3:

⁸ When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, he saw Haman falling on the couch where Esther was lying...

King Xerxes thought Haman was trying rape Esther.

⁸ ...The king said, "Will he even attack the queen while I am in the house?"

Embarrassment #4:

⁹ Harbona, one of the eunuchs there serving the king, said, "Look, a seventy-five foot platform stands near Haman's house. This is the one Haman had prepared for Mordecai, who gave the warning that saved the king." The king said, "Hang Haman on it!"¹⁰ So they hanged Haman on the platform he had prepared for Mordecai.

Now read Esther 8:1,2 to see the final insult to Haman:

- ❑ Xerxes gave all of Haman's property to Esther.
- ❑ Esther made Mordecai manager over all that property.
- ❑ Xerxes made Mordecai Prime Minister, Haman's old job.

v. **Victory for the Jews (Esther 8-10)**

Problem: Haman's law which ordered execution of all Jews was still in effect. The Jews needed that law changed immediately. (Read Esther 8:5-6.) Esther appealed to change Haman's law. But King Xerxes did not have the power to change that law.

w. **Why couldn't Xerxes' repeal his earlier order?**

See the note on page 2 about "the laws of Persia and Media" (Esther 1:19). Not even Xerxes had the authority to stop the holocaust. However, he gave his new Prime Minister, Mordecai, authority figure out a way to fix the problem and write a law "in the king's name" for the Jews. (Esther 8:7-8)

Mordecai's solution was to write a law that gave the Jews permission to defend themselves, and to fight back.

^{8:11} These were the king's orders: The Jewish people in every city have the right to gather together to protect themselves. They may destroy, kill, and completely wipe out the army of any state or people who attack them. And they are to do the same to the women and children of that army. They may also take by force the property of their enemies.¹² The one day set for the Jewish people to do this in all the empire of King Xerxes was the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar.¹³ A copy of the king's order was to be sent out as a law in every state. It was to be made known to the people of every nation living

in the kingdom so the Jewish people would be ready on that set day to strike back at their enemies...

¹⁶ It was a time of happiness, joy, gladness, and honor for the Jewish people. ¹⁷ ...In every state and city to which the king's order went, they were having feasts and celebrating. And many people through all the empire became Jews, because they were afraid of the Jewish people.

x. Start of the annual Jewish festival of Purim.

^{9:20} Mordecai wrote down everything that had happened. Then he sent letters to all the Jewish people in all the empire of King Xerxes, far and near. ²¹ He told them to celebrate every year on the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar, ²² because that was when the Jewish people got rid of their enemies. They were also to celebrate it as the month their sadness was turned to joy and their crying for the dead was turned into celebration. He told them to celebrate those days as days of joyful feasting and as a time for giving food to each other and presents to the poor.

²⁶ So these days were called Purim, which comes from the word "Pur" (the lot). Because of everything written in this letter and what they had seen and what happened to them, ²⁷ the Jewish people set up this custom. They and their descendants and all those who join them are always to celebrate these two days every year.

The Jewish holiday of Purim is celebrated every year in the spring, usually in March. The date was set by Haman for the day he wanted all Jews killed. Haman chose that day by "casting lots" -- in our culture today we would say, "by having a **lottery**." The Persian word for "lot" is *pur*. Hebrew plurals are formed with the suffix "-im."

The celebration of Purim is very festive.

- ❑ The holiday begins in the evening with a "minor fast" -- skipping dinner -- to remember Esther's three-day fast in preparation for her appeal to Xerxes.
- ❑ In the morning, people meet in the synagogue and read the story of Esther. Every time the name of Haman is mentioned, people boo, hiss, stamp their feet, and rattle noise makers. Every time the names of Esther and Mordecai are mentioned, the people cheer. Children dress as characters of the story and act out the story.
- ❑ Then they feast, exchange gifts, and donate food baskets to the poor (Esther 9:22).
- ❑ A special Purim holiday cookie is *hamentaschen* -- Haman's pockets.

Learn more about the Jewish celebration of Purim from www.jewfaq.org.

y. **Lessons for us?**

There are some aspects of the Esther story that are troubling.

First, Esther was required to do many things that violated her religious roots. The king's order made her part of his harem, violating Biblical principles of sexual purity and marriage. Her training and her life in the royal court made it necessary for her to eat non-kosher foods. And she had to hide her identity as a Jew. However, keep in mind that this is a common experience of Jewish people in times of intense persecution, especially during the Spanish Inquisition.

Second, when we read about the way the Jews avenged their persecutors, it appears that they went too far. The king's order gave the Jews permission to kill the wives and children of those who attacked them (and those who were prepared to attack them). However, keep in mind that this is exactly what their enemies had planned against them. Also notice that the Bible does not say that they actually went that far. The Bible does note that even though King Xerxes gave permission to take the property of their persecutors, the Jews refused to do that (Esther 9:15).

What are the positive aspects of this story?

We non-Jews see once again the intense persecution Jewish people have suffered over the centuries. Why have so many people hated Jewish people for so many years? Truly Satan inspires this hatred against the people God chose to bring His Savior to the world.

It is interesting that the name of God is never mentioned in the whole book of Esther. Yet we see God's influence and power through the whole story. When Mordecai encourages Esther to appeal to the king for her people, Mordecai says, "*Who knows, you may have been chosen queen for just such a time as this.*" Esther's response to Mordecai was to ask the people to fast. In this context it is obvious the purpose of the fast was for prayer to God.

Another lesson in story is example that both Mordecai and Esther are, for their courage to do the right thing, no matter the cost.

Finally, we see the power of God to turn around the schemes of evil-doers against themselves. He often allows things to become worse before they get better.