

ESTHER

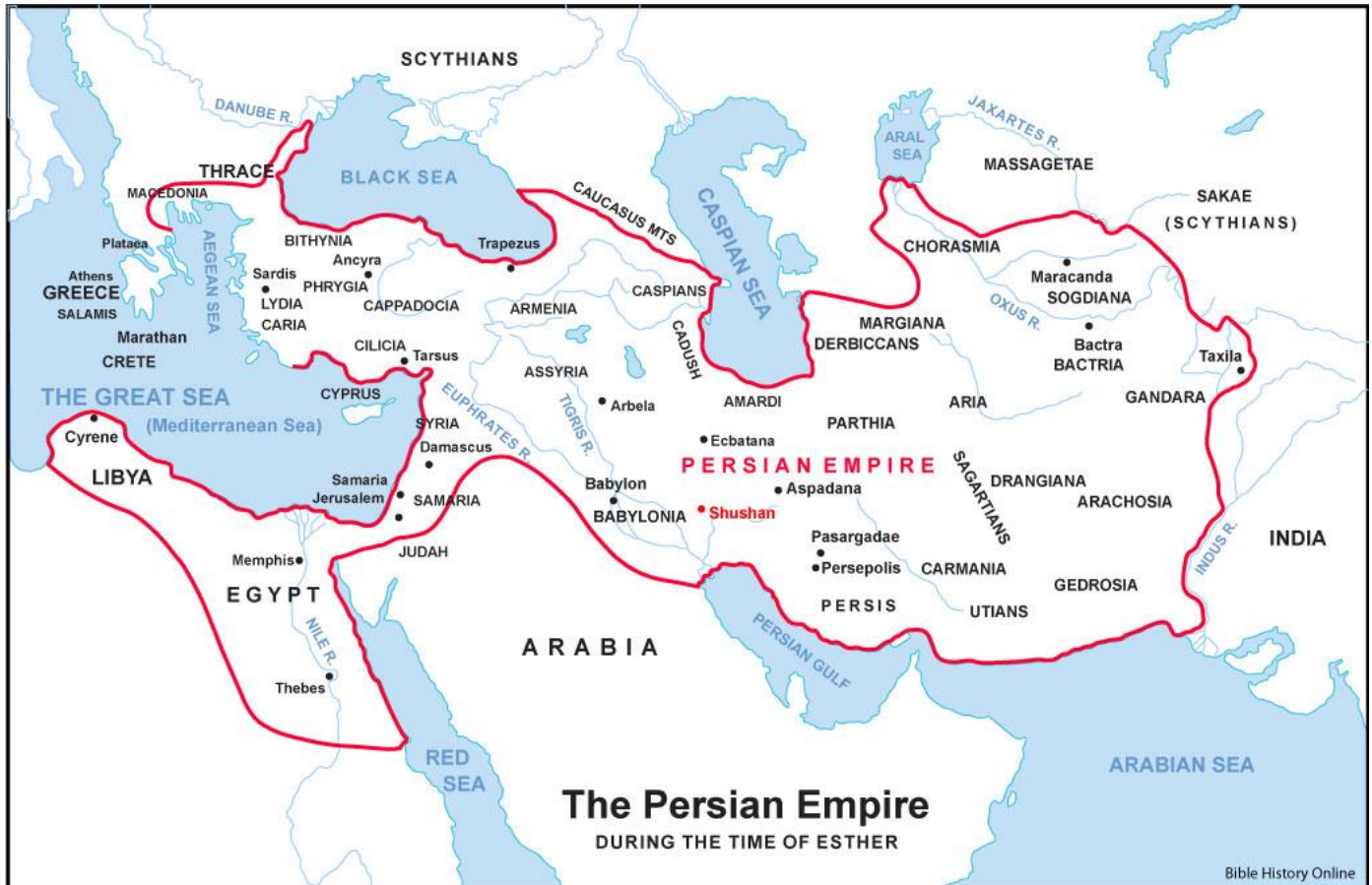


FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS...

Bible Studies for Ashfield Presbyterian
ashfieldpresbyterian.org.au

Introduction:

The events of Esther take place in Persia (present day Iran) during the reign of King Xerxes from 486 to 465 B.C. It has been over one hundred years since the beginning of the exile, and Babylon has been conquered by Persia. The story is set in the city of Susa, which is where the king has his winter palace.



The remnant Jews have been scattered throughout Mesopotamia by the Persian government. The Jews cling to their religious identity and even their flickering hope of a Messiah who will rescue them. King Cyrus of Persia fulfilled a divine prophecy that allowed the Jews to return to Judah in 536 BC. While thousands made the journey (retold in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah), most, including Mordecai and Esther, simply remained where they were in Persia, rather than risk starting over.

Esther's story presents the last major threat to, and deliverance of, the Jewish people in the Old Testament period. The Jewish festival of Purim, which is still celebrated today, is established in Esther, which accounts for the book's great popularity among the Jewish people.

Esther is known for being the only book in which God is not mentioned. This doesn't mean the book has nothing to teach us. It is a wonderful story of God's providence and the character of his people told with humour, irony, repetition and contrast. The major theme is that God is working in the circumstances and events of people's lives to bring about his plans. God is the director, the conductor, the weaver. When we respond in obedience and godliness, God can use us to bring about his purposes.

Esther 1-3: A Persecuted People:

The most important person in a play is not on the stage. The director is the one who has instructed the cast for months before on where to stand and sit and when and how to say a line. The director is behind the scenes giving final instructions, touching up makeup and encouraging the players--orchestrating every detail.

In the book of Esther God is not mentioned, but he is the key figure in the story. He works through the circumstances to place everything in order so that his plans will be accomplished. God is the director of our lives as well. As we look back at different times in our lives, we can see his handprints all over.

1. Recall a time in your past when you saw God work through circumstances in your life to bring something about. Share it with the group.
2. **Read Esther 1.** What was the purpose of the six-month feast that Xerxes threw? Describe the celebration (vv. 2-8). Why might the king have given such an extravagant party?
3. Why does King Xerxes ask Queen Vashti to come to him (vv. 10-11)?
4. Why did the wise men perceive Queen Vashti's refusal to be so dangerous to the kingdom (vv. 16-20)? The wise men mention respect several times in this chapter. In their view how was respect gained and maintained?
5. **Read Esther 2.** Summarize the plan to find a new queen that King Xerxes put into action (vv. 1-4).
6. How does Esther enter the story and become the queen (vv. 5-17)? It is mentioned three times that Esther won approval in someone's eyes (vv. 9, 15, 17). What does this tell us about Esther?
7. How does Mordecai enter into the plot of the story (vv. 19-23)?
8. Even though God has not been directly mentioned in the book, where do you see his hand moving in the story so far? Where do you see God's hand moving in circumstances in your life right now? How do you think he wants you to respond?

9. **Read Esther 3.** List all the words and phrases in this chapter which bring to mind tragedy or conflict.

10. What is the conflict between Haman and Mordecai which causes Haman's intense reaction to Mordecai (vv. 2-6)?

11. Why did Haman cast lots? (v7) Keep a note of this reference to *purim*. It is very significant! (If you're curious, look at 9:23-28 for the significance).

12. How does Haman persuade the king to adopt his plan to destroy the Jews (vv. 8-9)?

13. In verses 12-14 the words each, every and all are repeated frequently. What might the author have been trying to communicate in this detailed description of the edict?

14. This chapter gives us even more detail about who King Xerxes was. What do we learn about him?

15. The Jews suffer because they are God's people. Does God promise that his people will be protected from trouble in this life? What DOES God promise? See 1 Peter 4:12-19.

Points to Ponder and Pray About:

Thank God for his providential direction over your life.

Ask God to teach you how to give respect and to make you a person worthy of respect.

Ask God to give you confidence in his work in your life.

Pray that you will be given wise counselors who will give you godly advice.

Prayer Points:

Esther 4-6: It Just So Happened...

1. Can you think of a time when obeying God's call meant taking a risk or facing a difficulty. How did you feel? What did you pray? Share it with the group.
2. **Read Esther 4.** Describe the response of Mordecai and the Jews to Haman's plot (vv. 1-3).
3. Why do you think Mordecai was so confident in his plan to stop the annihilation of the Jews (vv. 6-8)?
4. What is Esther's first reaction to Mordecai's request that she go to the king (vv. 9-11)? How do Mordecai's arguments in verses 12-14 persuade Esther to go to the king?
5. In this chapter how do we see God's sovereignty and people's responses working together?
6. **Read Esther 5.** What risks does Esther take in verses 1-8?
7. What part have feasts played in the story up until now?
8. What picture is painted of Haman (vv. 9-14)? Haman boasts about having everything: sons, wealth, position and recognition. Why do you think Haman is still so consumed with Mordecai? How does the passage contrast Esther's character and wisdom with Haman's?
9. **Read Esther 6.** Where do you see irony in King Xerxes' and Haman's actions on this particular night? What brings a smile to your face as you read it? Why?

10. How does the king respond to discovering Mordecai's role in thwarting the assassination plot (vv. 2-6)?

11. Haman sought comfort from his wife and friends after his ride through the city with Mordecai, but he receives a very different response. How do his wife and advisors interpret the situation and react to Haman (vv. 12-14)? Why?

12. How does God turn around the plans of men and use them for his salvation-purposes? How does he do the same in the events of Jesus' death? (See Acts 2:22-24; 4:27-28)

13. Mordecai has achieved a minor victory (11-12), but the major victory hasn't happened yet. Haman still hopes for revenge. The last verse of the chapter (v14) sets the scene for a cliff-hanger. Will it be a victory for Mordecai or Haman? How do you respond when you read v14? Which way do you think "the dice will roll"?

Points to Ponder and Pray About:

Pray that doing the right thing will be more than a slogan for you--that it will be a way of life.

Pray that God will be moulding you into a person of character who responds out of humility rather than pride.

Prayer Points:

Esther 7-10: Party Time!

Esther and Mordecai have chosen to do what is right all along, yet they face destruction. Haman, who is prideful, angry and bitter, has been successful in plotting against the Jews. Finally, in chapter 7 Esther and Mordecai see justice taking place.

However, in our lives we do not always see justice when we choose to do what is right. The people of God must have consistent character whether or not justice prevails in this life.

1. Can you recall a time when God has proven himself faithful to you in a difficult situation. Share it with the group.
2. **Read Esther 7.** Name all of the truths that were previously hidden but are now revealed in this chapter.
3. This chapter revolves around Queen Esther, King Xerxes and Haman. What might each of them be feeling at the beginning of the banquet? As the banquet progressed?
4. How do you see justice carried out in the lives of Esther, Mordecai and Haman?
5. As Christians, when should we expect to see justice served and when should we be satisfied with doing what is right? Give examples from your experience. How can you seek justice in a situation where you currently see injustice?
6. **Read Esther 8.** List all the ways in this chapter that Esther and Mordecai are rewarded by God through the actions of the king.
7. In verses 3-6 we see a little of Esther's heart. How does she feel toward her people? How does King Xerxes respond to Esther's plea (vv. 7-10)?
8. God provides for the Jews through the edict Mordecai issued in the king's name. How did the edict (vv. 11-13) provide what Esther was asking for in verses 5-6 without breaking the first edict (3:12-14)?
9. Describe the response of the Jews to God's provision and protection (vv. 15-17).

10. **Read Esther 9--10.** Summarize the events of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar.

11. Describe the people that the Jews actually destroyed on these days in the month of Adar (9:5-17).

12. The author mentions three separate times that the Jews did not lay their hands on their enemies' plunder. Why might the Jews have left the plunder despite the king's permission to take it (9:10, 15-16)?

13. Mordecai and Esther proclaimed and established the celebration of *Purim* as a holiday for all the Jews. What was the purpose of the celebration (9:20-27)?

14. God has saved his people and blessed Esther and Mordecai for their obedience to him. Summarize what happens to Esther and Mordecai at the end of the story (9:29--10:3).

15. Throughout Scripture God instructs his people to commemorate the times when he acted to provide and save his people (eg Exodus 12:24-28). Jesus did the same on the night that he was betrayed (see Lk 22:7-20). What does celebrating the Lord's Supper mean to YOU?

16. Why is remembering God's acts of faithfulness important for us as Christians? What are some ways we could celebrate these times together?

Points to Ponder and Pray About:

Justice begins with prayer. Ask God to show you how he would like to use you in the pursuit of justice.

Think over the past week and share how God has been faithful to you. Express to God your joy and gladness about his provision for you.

Begin your tradition of celebrating right now by offering your praise and thanksgiving to God for all he has done for you - especially in Jesus.

Prayer Points: