

Bible Study: The Book of Esther

Introduction:

The story of Esther reads like a movie plot, with a beautiful queen risking her life to prevent genocide. What spiritual lessons can we learn from this book? Did you know that Esther is mentioned more times in the Bible than any other woman? Did you know that the book bearing her name in the Old Testament does not mention God even once? What lessons can we learn today from studying the book about this very remarkable woman?

Background to the book of Esther

The story of Esther takes place in the Persian Empire during the reign of Ahasuerus, known more familiarly to us by the Greek form of his name, Xerxes I. He was the son of Darius the Great and reigned from 486-465 B.C. He ruled over a vast empire that extended from India to Ethiopia (Esther 1:1).

Esther was a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin, which had been part of the kingdom of Judah. Her ancestors were among the Jews who had been carried captive to Babylon nearly 100 years earlier. There were many Jews who didn't return to Jerusalem when it became possible, preferring to continue living where they had settled around the Persian Empire. After the death of Esther's parents, she was raised by Mordecai, an older cousin (Esther 2:7), who served in the Persian ruler's palace.

The author of the book of Esther is unknown, though some attribute the work to Mordecai. There are many reasons for this popularity. The book of Esther tells a compelling story, dramatic and exciting, with clearly defined heroes and villains. It also reveals deep and abiding spiritual truths about God's power to deliver us from danger and oppression, even when despotic rulers plan to do evil to God's people. Though God's name or a direct reference to the divine does not appear in the entire story, nonetheless, God's presence and deliverance of His people is clearly felt and implied throughout this story.

Summary of Chapter 1

Chapter 1 sets the scene in the Persian court. The king was offended when his wife Vashti refused to appear before him when he ordered her to do so. There

was a great feast taking place at the time, and they were all merry with wine (Esther 1:10-11).

When the queen didn't appear, the king, egged on by his advisers, removed her as his queen. They then advised him to seek out a new queen by searching for the most beautiful women in the land. Then the king would select one to become his queen.

Read Chapter 1 and Discuss

Summary of Chapter 2

Chapter 2 introduces one of the women taken for this competition, a beautiful Jewish girl named Hadassah. Her name was changed to Esther when she was brought to the king's court.

Esther received favor from everyone who saw her, especially the king (verses 15-17). The king selected Esther to be his new queen, but Mordecai counseled her to not reveal the fact that she was a Jew, because Jews were still held in some suspicion throughout the Persian Empire.

Shortly after she became queen, a seemingly unrelated incident is recorded in Esther 2:21-23. Two men plotted to kill the king, but Mordecai became aware of the plot and had Esther reveal it to the king. The two men were hanged, and the incident was recorded in the king's personal history. This incident turns out to have a great deal to do with the rest of the story.

Read Chapter 2 and Discuss

Summary of Chapter 3

Chapter 3 introduces us to Haman, the villain in the story, who became second in command in the empire. He was an arrogant man, and he demanded that everyone bow down to him. Everyone did, except Mordecai (verse 2). This so incensed Haman that he succeeded in getting the king to issue an edict that all the Jews in the land should be destroyed (verses 8-15).

Read Chapter 3 and Discuss

Summary of Chapter 4

In chapter 4 Mordecai implored Esther to intervene on behalf of her people or they would all be killed. Esther reminded Mordecai that anyone who came before the king without being called, even the queen, would be subject to death. The only exception to this would be if the king extended mercy by holding out the golden scepter (verses 10-12).

Mordecai then uttered the most famous line from the book when he said, "For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. *Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*" (4:14, emphasis added throughout).

Esther then agreed to risk her life for her people. She asked Mordecai to have her people fast for her success, and she put her life on the line by going to the king for help (verses 15-16).

Read Chapter 4 and Discuss

Summary of Chapter 5

Chapter 5 tells us that the king not only held out the golden scepter to save her life, he also said that he would grant anything she asked of him, even to half the kingdom (verses 2-3). She invited the king and Haman to a banquet that day. At that banquet, she told the king that she would inform him of her desire at another banquet the next day, and she again asked that Haman should be invited to hear her request (verses 7-8).

Read Chapter 5 and Discuss

Summary of Chapter 6

Chapter 6 brings back to our attention the incident of the conspiracy to kill the king in chapter 2. The king was unable to sleep that night and asked for his history to be read to him. It seems he just "happened" to hear the part about the plot to take his life and how Mordecai had saved his life. He asked what had been done to reward Mordecai. His servants replied that nothing had been done.

Who should be outside waiting to see the king that morning but evil Haman, who was plotting to kill Mordecai! So when the king called Haman to come in, the two men had totally opposite plans in mind.

The king asked Haman what should be done to someone the king wanted to honor. Of course, in his pride, Haman thought the king was talking about him. So he said that such a person should be treated like royalty and honored by a high official announcing, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!" (verse 9).

Imagine Haman's surprise when the king assigned him to honor his archenemy Mordecai (verse 10-12)!

Read Chapter 6 and Discuss

Summary of Chapter 7

Chapter 7 recounts the events of the second banquet that Esther had requested, where she would make known what she wanted from the king. She revealed the plot to destroy her and her people, then dramatically named the mastermind: "This wicked Haman!" (verse 6).

The king was so shocked and incensed by this turn of events that he had to leave the room to calm down. But when he returned, he saw "Haman had fallen across the couch where Esther was," pleading with her to spare his life (verses 7-8). The king accused Haman of trying to assault his wife, the queen, and he ordered Haman to be hanged on the very gallows that Haman had built to kill Mordecai (verse 10).

Read Chapter 7 and Discuss

Summaries of Chapters 8 through 10

Chapters 8 through 10 recount the rejoicing of the Jews for their deliverance and the celebration that was set on the 14th day of the month Adar to commemorate this great event. It has been celebrated by the Jews ever since as a great day of deliverance and is known as the Feast of Purim. Purim derives its name from the word *pur*, meaning lot, as in the casting of lots. Haman had cast lots to find the best day to destroy the Jews (3:7).

Read Chapters 8-10 and Discuss

Lessons of the book of Esther

The book of Esther may not have God's name stated directly, but His involvement is felt in many ways throughout the story, especially when Esther implored the people to seek help through fasting (4:15-16). In the Bible fasting was done to draw closer to God and was accompanied by heartfelt prayers (Daniel 9:3; Acts 14:23). Esther is clearly a story of God's intervention and deliverance.

Esther is also an inspiring story about a remarkable woman who was willing to risk her life to save her people. She was a woman of principle who was willing to put the lives of others ahead of even her own life. She was an outstanding example of serving others even under the most stressful circumstances. Jesus Christ said, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Most of the time our lives may be pretty routine, but all of us have a few defining moments when we may be called on to put godly principle above personal benefit. What will you do when you encounter those defining moments in your life? What will you do when you face "such a time as this"? Will you choose to do the right thing as opposed to what might give you some personal benefit?