



## Esther 1-2

As we turn our attention to the book of Esther, we are moving about 600 years forward in the timeline of Israel's history. The book of Ruth took place during the period of the Judges, somewhere between 1250 BC and 1000 BC. Esther became Queen of the Persian Empire during the year 479 BC. This is her story.

The book of Esther is a masterfully written story full of intrigue, suspense, irony, humor, and startling reversals of fortune. This book is notable for the fact that it doesn't mention God at all. There's no reference to prayer or prophecy or the Jewish Law. There is no word from God and no word spoken to God. Nevertheless, God is the hero of the book; it is God who works behind the scenes to bring about His magnificent work of salvation for His people Israel.

The action takes place in Susa, the winter capital of the vast Persian Empire. Persia was the greatest superpower of its day. It included most of the known world, stretching from India to Sudan. The only world power outside of Persia's domain was Greece.



### 1. Read Esther 1:1-8 *The King of the Persian Empire prepares to go to war*

What is striking to you about the description of Xerxes' feasts?

The book begins with a raucous party. The historian Herodotus explains that this grandiose display of wealth and power was for the purpose of rallying support for Xerxes' plan to deploy his navy in a massive invasion of Greece.

2. Read Esther 1:9-22 *The Queen refuses the command of the King*

- a. What was the King's reaction to Queen Vashti's refusal to come and display her beauty to his guests? (1:12)
- b. How did King Xerxes approach his decision about how to deal with Vashti? (1:13-15)
- c. How did Xerxes' adviser Memukan amplify this embarrassing incident so that it became an empire-wide issue? (1:16-18)
- d. What chilling fact do you learn about a Persian royal decree? (1:19)
- e. What do you learn from this chapter about the power and the reach of the Persian government in the lives of its citizens? (1:20-22)

3. Read Esther 2:1-20 *Xerxes plans to take a new Queen*

- a. What did the King's attendants propose as a plan for choosing a queen? (2:1-4)

This was a heartless exploitation of young women. The girls were taken from their homes and compelled to comply. After a year of beauty treatments, each girl had one night to spend with the King. After that night she was taken to a different harem, and she would spend the rest of her life in seclusion—never permitted to marry another man or interact with family. Some might become concubines, and they would be brought to be with the King whenever he fancied them, but there was no possibility of a normal family life. The glorious palace in Susa would be a sumptuous prison for life.

b. What do you learn about Esther from 2:5-7?

***Why are God's people living outside of the Promised Land?***

In 586 BC, over 100 years before the time of Esther, Jerusalem was demolished by Babylon, and the Jewish people were removed from their land and taken as captives to Babylon. During their years of exile, the Jews had no temple, no priesthood, and no monarchy. It was impossible for them to worship God in accordance with the Law He had given them.

In 539 BC, the Persians conquered Babylon, and the Persian King Cyrus gave the Jews the opportunity to return to their land and rebuild their temple. Thousands of Jews did return, but most of the exiled Jews did not. They were reluctant to leave the relatively safe life they had in Persia.

Most of those who remained in Persia were only nominal covenant people. They chose not to return to the Promised Land. They must have wondered whether God's promises still applied to them. Does God still care about them? Do they have any part in God's plan to bring blessing to the world?

c. How do you see God at work behind the scenes as Esther is taken into the palace at Susa? Who "just happened" to take special notice of her, and what favorable treatment did she receive? (2:8-9)

d. What secret did Esther hide? (2:10)

e. What happened on the night Esther was taken to Xerxes? (2:15-17)



- f. Vashti was deposed because she was too bold; she dared to defy the King. What do you discern about Esther's nature and personality from 2:10, 2:15, and 2:20?
- g. Give several reasons why Esther is a surprising choice as a candidate for the hero that God will use to save God's people from death and destruction?
- h. *For personal application:* God is able to use His people—even those who seem weak and insignificant—to overwhelm the strategies of those who oppose God and who oppose His people of faith. God is always at work in ways we cannot imagine. Let this be a comfort to you today.

4. Read Esther 2:21-23 *Mordecai saves the King*

Mordecai was "sitting at the king's gate." This means that he was a civil servant, holding some kind of official position in the court. The gate into the palace complex was a large building in which legal decisions were given and official government business was transacted. Mordecai worked there.

- a. What information "just happened" to be overheard by Mordecai?
- b. What did Mordecai do with the information he had discovered?



5. *Taking a second look: God is faithful even when His people are not*

a. Esther chose (at Mordecai's direction) to hide her Jewish identity. What compromises was she forced to make as she participated in Persian culture? In what ways did she have to set aside the moral and cultural standards of the Jewish Law?

b. *For personal application:* The Biblical author does not invite us to either criticize or commend Mordecai's and Esther's choices; but rather, the book demonstrates the powerful way that God uses Mordecai and Esther to fulfill His promises to preserve His people. The glorious paradox of the book of Esther is that God is always present and always at work, even when He seems conspicuously absent.

We can take comfort in the fact that our God, who loves us relentlessly, is pleased to use us for His good purposes even though we have failed to love Him as we should.

My Prayer:

*Father, thank you for loving me even when I disappoint You.*

*I pray that you would use me for Your good purposes.*

*I yield my life to You today.*