



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

BIBLE SURVEY

THE UN-DEVOTIONAL

HABAKKUK,
ZEPHANIAH & ESTHER

Week 3

Introduction to Esther

Authorship: There are no hints as to who wrote this book, but it is clear that whoever wrote it knew the Persian culture well. The attention to detail suggests that it may have been written by someone who was an eyewitness to the events, and probably a Jew—perhaps Esther or Mordecai. Some have suggested either Ezra or Nehemiah wrote the book, but there is no evidence to support the view.

Date: The events described in the book of Esther take place in the Persian period (539-331 B.C.). The king referred to in the book, Xerxes, also known as Ahasuerus, reigned from 485-465 B.C.

Distinctives: Esther is a unique book in many respects. It is the only historical record of certain events. Two examples are the origin of the Jewish feast of Purim, and certain characters who are not mentioned in other historical sources. Neither Esther, Mordecai nor Haman are mentioned in any other place but this book. The method by which the king chose his new bride is not recorded elsewhere.

There is no mention of the name of God in the entire book of Esther, and there are no overt miracles. Yet, we see God working behind the scenes to protect his people. Esther is a book that clearly demonstrates how God is working even when he seems to be silent.

Setting and purpose: This book explains the history behind the Jewish feast of Purim. At the time of Esther, many Jews had already returned from captivity to their own land to rebuild the Temple and Jerusalem. However, most Israelites had made new homes in other parts of the Persian Empire and had chosen not to return to Israel.

The two heroes of the book, Esther and her older cousin and guardian Mordecai, were among those who had not returned. Mordecai apparently held some office in the palace at Susa (Shushan).

King Xerxes (Ahasuerus) was known to be a strong and capable leader, yet prone to an irrational temper and fits of rage. He was also known for his wild parties and drinking.

Through our 21st century Christian eyes, Esther and Mordecai may seem less than godly. Esther allows herself to be part of a harem, to have sex with the king before marriage and eventually to marry a pagan. Mordecai encourages her in these things. However, we must consider that in the Old Testament being part of a king's harem was considered a form of marriage. Furthermore, a pagan king held absolute authority over the people of Judah. Esther and Mordecai believed they were acting faithfully and morally in light of what they understood about God. In any case, God's mercy is not conditional on perfect human behavior.

More than anything, Esther is a book that teaches clearly that God is in control of history. While there are times when God appears to be silent, he is at work in ways we may not perceive.

Reading outline:

I. AN UNFORESEEN CRISIS, 1-5

- A. Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous, 1:1-12
- B. Where Is the Love? 1:13-22
- C. And the Winner Is...! 2:1-18
- D. The Right Place at the Right Time, 2:19-23
- E. The Price of Obedience, 3:1-11
- F. The Solution to the Jewish Problem, 3:12-15
- G. One Last Hope, 4
- H. Setting the Trap, 5:1-8
- I. The Fly in the Ointment, 5:9-14

II. AN UNFORESEEN DELIVERANCE, 6-10

- A. The Beginning of the End, 6
- B. No Escape, 7
- C. Cancel That Order, 8:1-8
- D. The Rules Have Changed, 8:9-17
- E. The Tables Are Turned, 9:1-17
- F. Death Takes a Holiday, 9:18-32
- G. For the Record, 10

*“But when the attendants
delivered the king’s command,
Queen Vashti refused to come.
Then the king became furious
and burned with anger.”*

Esther 1:12



Artwork by Gustav Doré

Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous

DAY 15

Esther 1:1-12

Do you ever envy people who live in great wealth and luxury? If you could trade places with them, would you? Why, or why not?

1. This lavish display of wealth was not only for Xerxes' nobles and administrators, but for his military leaders (vs. 2-3). Why would the king want to impress military men with his wealth?
2. Can you imagine hosting a party for more than a day—much less six months (v. 4)? Why would the king host such an extended party?
3. Read the descriptions of the elaborate decorations (vs. 6-7), and try to picture the scene.
4. What caused Xerxes to become furious (v. 12)? Why would Queen Vashti disobey the king?

1. How much does a person have to have to be considered wealthy? How do you feel about those who are wealthy?
2. What do you think would be the best part about being wealthy? The worst part?
3. How would you describe your level of contentment with your present financial situation: (a) very satisfied, (b) mostly satisfied, (c) satisfied, (d) not very satisfied, (e) very unsatisfied.

Xerxes (v. 1) is the Greek form of the Persian name Ahasuerus. He ruled the Persian Empire for 21 years, from 485-465 B.C. He is also mentioned in Ezra 4:6 and Daniel 9:1. He maintained elaborate palaces in Persepolis and Susa. The banquet mentioned here is probably the one he gave when he was planning to invade Greece. The lavish display of wealth and the duration of the event had a purpose—to convince his generals and leaders that he had the means to wage an expensive military campaign. **Vashti** (v. 9) means “beautiful woman.” It is possible this woman was the one whom the Greek historian Herodotus called Amestris, Xerxes’ queen and mother of the next ruler, Artaxerxes. While several reasons have been given as to why Vashti would refuse to come to Xerxes, the most plausible seems to be that the king and his guests were drunk and she did not wish to degrade her royal dignity by being a spectacle.

OPENING

up to the Word

DIGGING

into the Word

LIVING

out the Word

WINDOW

on the Word

DAY 16

Where Is the Love?

Esther 1:13-22

OPENING
up to the Word

Have you ever had someone about whom you cared deeply tell you they never wanted to see you again, or abandon the relationship?

DIGGING
into the Word

1. Why would the king need to consult with anyone before passing sentence on the queen (vs. 13-14)?

2. What did Xerxes' counselors fear most with regard to Vashti's actions (vs. 16-18)?

3. What was Vashti's punishment (v. 19)? (a) exile from Persia, (b) execution in Persia, (c) slavery in Persia, (d) banishment from the king's presence.

4. The king's counselors hoped that this punishment would cause what kind of reaction in the women of Persia (v. 20)?

5. What new law was created as a result of Queen Vashti's actions (v. 19-22)?

LIVING
out the Word

1. Has someone you loved, maybe a close friend or family member, distanced themselves from you? What was the reason?

2. Have you ever felt that it was necessary to refuse the directions or instructions of an incredibly powerful individual?

WINDOW
on the Word

"Wise men who understood the laws" (v. 13). Close advisors to royalty were called "wise men." This was noted by Herodotus and was a feature of ancient eastern royal courts.

“He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, proclaiming in each people’s tongue that every man should be ruler over his own household.”

Esther 1:22



Persian messenger—montage by Omar Cova—PTM

DAY 17

And the Winner Is...

Esther 2:1-18

OPENING
up to the Word

Have you ever seen a beauty pageant? What did you think of the criteria used to pick the winner? Did your personal choice win the competition?

DIGGING
into the Word

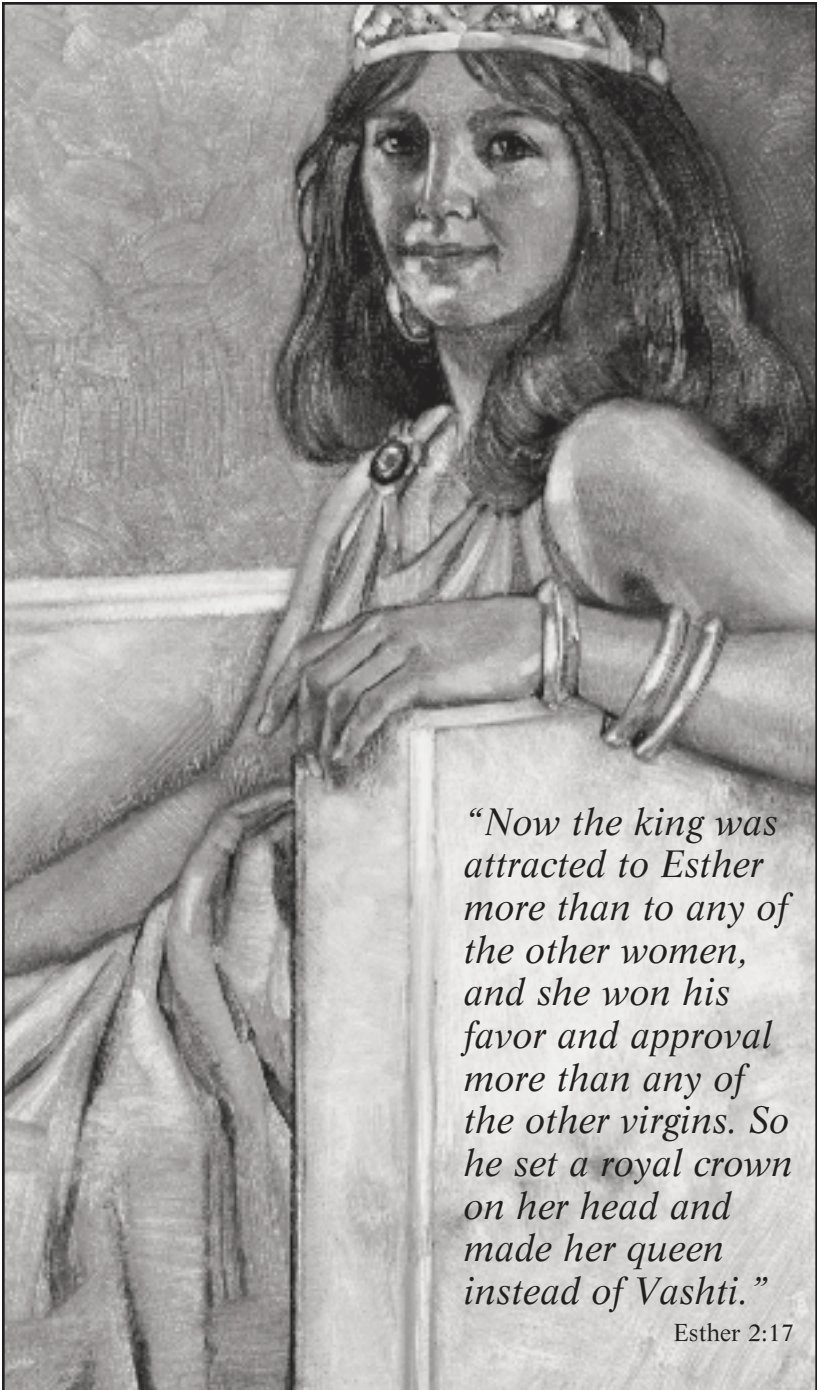
1. Why do you think the king's advisors encouraged him to replace Vashti (vs. 2-4)? Why would the king choose a new queen at all?
2. How had Mordecai, a Jew, ended up in the Persian capital (vs. 5-7)?
3. Esther's Hebrew name was (v. 7): (a) Ruth, (b) Sarah, (c) Hadassah, (d) Golda.
4. Esther did not divulge her nationality or family connections to anyone. Why not (v. 10)?
5. How long did Esther have to undergo beauty treatments, and what did they consist of (v. 12)?
6. How did King Xerxes celebrate his new choice of Esther as queen (v. 18)?

LIVING
out the Word

1. Had you been Esther, what do you think you would you have done? Would your self-image hold up to the scrutiny that Esther had to endure? If you had to rate your own attractiveness, would you say you were: (a) beautiful/handsome; (b) attractive, but not stunning; (c) plain, average; (d) ruggedly appealing; (d) slightly unattractive.
2. How much time and attention do you feel it's appropriate to give to make oneself more physically attractive?
3. What kind of beauty is God concerned with (1Pe 3:3-4)? Does this mean it is a sin to make the best presentation of your appearance ?

WINDOW
on the Word

"Tribe of Benjamin...son of Shimei...son of Kish" (v. 5). Jewish tradition suggests that this is an abbreviated genealogy indicating that Mordecai was a descendant of Saul (1Sa 9:1; 1Ch 8:33; 2 Sa 16:5). ***"In the evening...in the morning"*** (v. 14). Esther was not merely being prepared to appear beautiful, she was being prepared to have sexual relations with the king.



“Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.”

Esther 2:17

The Right Place at the Right Time

Esther 2:19-23

OPENING
up to the Word

Have you ever found yourself at just the right place at just the right time to rescue someone from danger or trouble?

DIGGING
into the Word

1. Why do you think Mordecai was always sitting at the king's gate (vs. 19, 21)?
2. When Esther became queen, did she stop listening to Mordecai's advice (v. 20)?
3. What caused the two would-be assassins to want to do away with their king (v. 21)?
4. Who was it who actually told the king about the assassination plot—Mordecai or Esther (v. 22)?
5. In what official way was Mordecai's action recorded (v. 23)? Was he rewarded for his actions at this time?

LIVING
out the Word

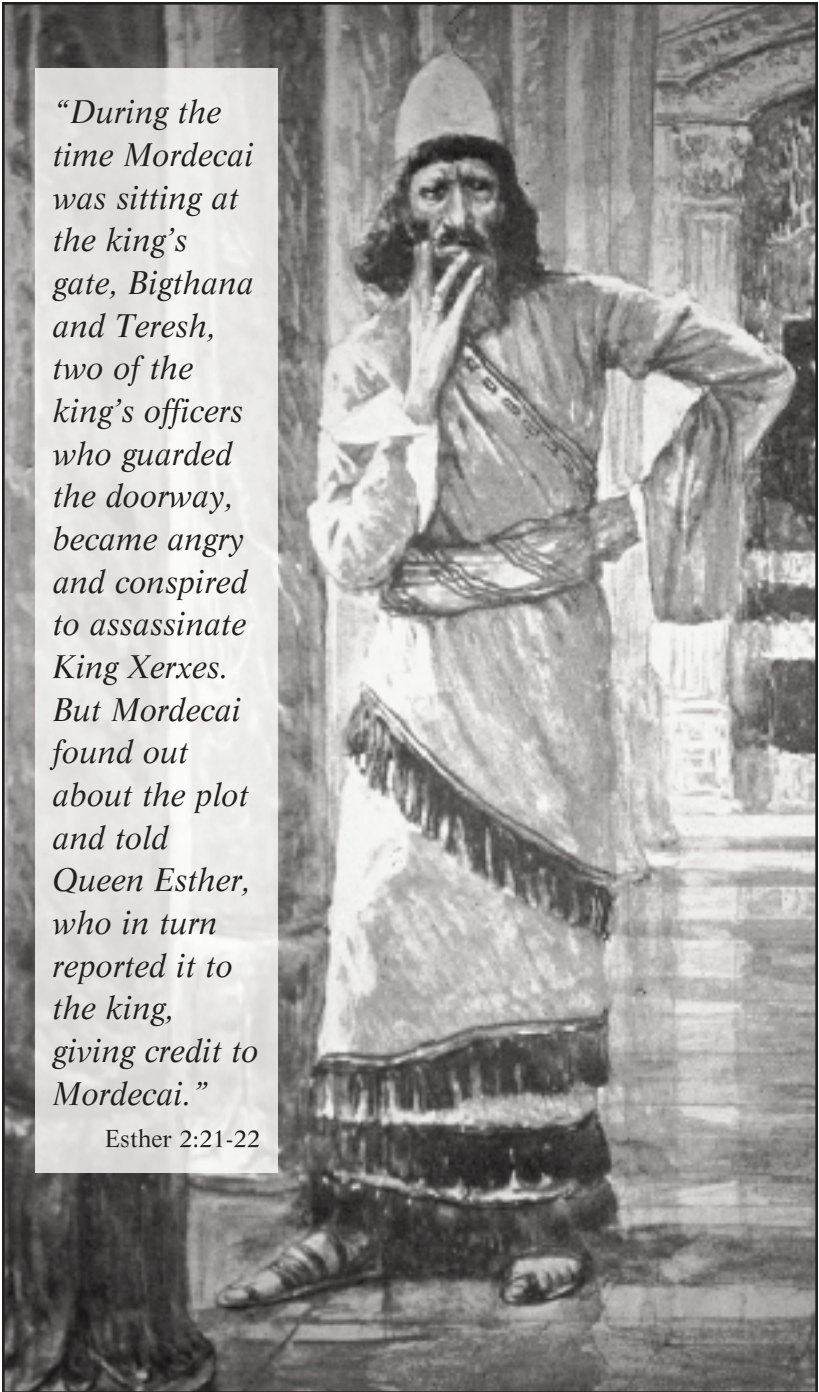
1. Do you think God ever directly placed you in the right place at the right time to help someone that no one else could?
2. Did the person you helped appreciate what you did for them, or did they even know you did it?

WINDOW
on the Word

*The reference to **the king's gate** (v. 19) may indicate that Mordecai was employed by the government. This helps explain how he could be in a position to uncover an assassination plot. "**The book of the annals**" (v. 23) were the official royal records, and this incident becomes pivotal later in the story.*

“During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king’s gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king’s officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai.”

Esther 2:21-22



Artwork by James Tissot

The Price of Obedience

Esther 3:1-11

OPENING
up to the Word

DIGGING
into the Word

LIVING
out the Word

WINDOW
on the Word

Has there ever been a time when following God meant inviting serious trouble into your life?

1. Who did King Xerxes honor and promote to a position second only to his own (v. 1)?
2. Mordecai the Jew was faced with a dilemma when Haman was promoted (v. 2). What did Mordecai refuse to do that the king commanded?
3. Though Haman was furious with Mordecai's refusal to bow down, why didn't he immediately punish Mordecai (vs. 5-6)?
4. Haman's counselors determined a date and time to plan to kill all the Jews. What method did they employ to fix the precise day and time (v. 7)?
5. How did Haman convince Xerxes to eliminate the Jews (v. 8)? How did Haman propose to repay the king for the cost of this massacre (v. 9)?

1. What is the most serious consequence you have faced for choosing to follow God? Did you ever think the cost of discipleship would be so high?
2. What motivates you to follow Christ, even when it will sometimes bring detrimental consequences into your life (Jn 14:15, 21)?

Agagite (v. 1) indicates that Haman was a descendant of Agag, the king of Amalek that Saul failed to kill as God had instructed (1Sa 15:7). The Amalekites were ancient enemies of Israel (Ex 17:8-14). Ironically, Mordecai, a possible descendant of Saul, now faces Haman the descendant of Agag. **"Knelt down and paid honor"** (v. 2). Mordecai may have felt this was an act of idolatry, or he may simply have refused to bow to the hereditary enemy of Israel. **Pur** (v. 7) was the Babylonian word for lot, similar to dice. **Ten thousand talents of silver** (v. 9) was about 375 tons—estimated by some scholars to be equal to two-thirds of the annual income of the Persian Empire. It is possible that Haman planned to acquire such a large sum by confiscating the Jews' property.

The Solution to the Jewish Problem

Esther 3:12-15

What was the Nazi regime's solution to the "Jewish problem" in World War II?

1. How did Haman get the word out that on a certain day all the Jews were to be attacked (v. 12)? Did the Jews know of the edict (v. 14)?

2. What did the order allow people to do with no fear of reprisal (v. 13)?

3. As this edict was being sent out across the empire, what did Haman and the king do (v. 15)? How do you think the Jews felt?

4. In contrast to the attitudes of Haman and Xerxes, how were the citizens of the city of Susa reacting to the news (v. 15)? What do you think might have caused their bewilderment?

1. Have you ever studied the history of anti-semitism? If you have, you will know that Jews have been hated in many nations and at many times in history.

2. How do you think one person could develop such a hatred for someone that he would want to wipe out an entire people?

3. Have Jews been the only ethnic group that have endured such hatred? Do you remember any "ethnic cleansings" in recent history?

4. Has there ever been a time in your life when you hated or belittled a group or race?

5. What are some prejudices that God has helped you overcome?

DAY 20

OPENING

up to the Word

DIGGING

into the Word

LIVING

out the Word

DAY 21

One Last Hope

Esther 4

OPENING
up to the Word

At times we find ourselves in such a predicament that only one person can help us. If you have experienced such a time, who was that person for you?

DIGGING
into the Word

1. How did Mordecai respond to the edict of Haman (vs. 1-2)?

2. The isolation of the harem would have prevented Esther from knowing about the edict. Do you think Mordecai was trying to get Esther's attention? When Esther heard that Mordecai was in a state of mourning, what did she try to get him to do (v. 4)?

3. When Mordecai asked Esther to intercede with the king for her people, what was she concerned about? Were these concerns justified (vs. 9-11)?

4. What was Mordecai convinced of, even if Esther refused to help (v. 14)? Why did he still ask Esther to intervene?

5. Although Esther agreed to risk approaching the king without first being invited, what request did she have of Mordecai (vs. 15-16)? Would you describe Esther as (a) courageous, (b) faithful, (c) caring, (d) fearful?

LIVING
out the Word

1. Has anyone ever told you that you were their last hope?

2. Has God ever been your last hope in a situation? What could he do that no one else could? Did he do it?

WINDOW
on the Word

***The gold scepter** (v. 11). The king had the power to execute anyone who came before him uninvited or without an appointment. The only time this law was overlooked was when the king himself extended his golden scepter—meaning he approved of the meeting. Since Esther had not been summoned before the king for a month, she had no way of knowing his attitude toward her. Had he grown tired of her, or unhappy with her? She couldn't know.*