

Gleaners Bible Studies B 8

STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Study 1

Esther and the King



Esther chapters 1 & 2

The book of Esther is an interesting one. It tells the story of a plot to exterminate the entire Jewish nation in the days of the Persian King, Ahasuerus (or Xerxes), and how it was thwarted. It also explains the origin of the Jewish Feast of Purim. The writer is unknown, but his nationalism and accurate knowledge of Persian ways, make it likely that he was a Jew who lived in Persia before the empire fell to Greece. The book covers a period of twelve years.

The great King Ahasuerus was at the height of his power. The opening verses of **chapter 1**, tell us that he reigned over an empire stretching from the Indus to northern Sudan. His winter capital, (which was unbearably hot in summer) was Susa, a city of Elam, 150 miles east of Babylon.

The Greek historian, Herodotus, describes him as a cruel, capricious, sensual man – which fits well with his character in this book. In the year 483 BC, he gave a huge feast, which was the climax to a six-month display of his wealth and power. The palace was decked out for these celebrations in a blaze of colour and there was great feasting and merrymaking. Ahasuerus had a beautiful queen named Vashti, who made sure that the women of the royal house were not left out of the festivities, by giving a feast for them. This then is the background against which our story is set.

Suddenly the atmosphere of joy and gladness in the palace was changed by an unexpected incident. At the height of the merriment, for which excessive feasting and drinking was largely responsible, the king imperiously calls for Vashti, the queen. He was very proud of her beauty and wanted to show her off to the assembled company. But Vashti refused to come! This was unprecedented conduct and an affront to the great King of the Persians. His wishes were law, and he was used to being obeyed. Her refusal made him look rather foolish in front of all the princes and nobles. So we have a very angry king and also an astonished royal house.

It is amazing that such a thing should happen when we consider the nature of the laws of the kingdom. The seriousness of the queen's action can be gauged by the reaction of the princes. **"The Queen's behaviour will become known to all women so that they will despise their husbands in their eyes." (1: 17)** What happened in the royal house would affect the whole kingdom. So the royal astrologers were consulted and the beautiful Vashti was deposed.

Historians tell us that there is an interval between **chapters 1 and 2**, covering the years of the disastrous Greek war, so that four years pass by before the king is able to get round to choosing a new queen. So we will pause here too to make one or two observations. It is most interesting to note that throughout the entire book of Esther the name of God is never mentioned. Two faithful Jews, Mordecai and Esther, form the focal point of the story. Nevertheless the book gives

unmistakable evidence of God's over-ruling in the affairs of men, and His unfailing care for His people. Remember that these were NOT the circumstances God really intended that His people should experience. They should have been in their own land, enjoying the worship and blessing of their God. It was their sin that had brought them into this situation. Yet God was still at work. He had not forsaken them. Had Haman's plot succeeded there would have been no Nehemiah and, far more important, no Christ! Someone once said. 'God often moves all the scenes behind which He is working' This is very true. The poet has put it thus - '... behind the dim unknown standeth God amid the shadows, keeping watch upon His own.'

A rebellious queen; an angry king; a faithful Jewish man; a beautiful Jewess – thus the story unfolds.

The king's anger had abated and among the beautiful young girls rounded up to be taken to the capital for twelve month's beauty treatment before being presented to the king, was Esther, Mordecai's cousin. This preparation time seemed designed to give every young girl the best opportunity of dazzling the king with her beauty. When Esther's turn came it seems she did just that. Not only did she delight the King, but her beauty brought her into favour with all who saw her, and she was crowned queen in place of Vashti.

It may seem strange to us that one of God's chosen people should be linked in marriage with a heathen king, and it does show that the Jews were not in the line of God's will. But God permitted these events to take place and in His kindness and mercy such ordering led to deliverance for His people. But always remember that God's greatest blessings come to those who obey His commands.

We notice two things about Esther that laid the foundation for her advancement. She did not at first, divulge her nationality. This was wise at the moment of her introduction to the king. Later she would risk her life by showing who she was, to save her people from destruction. Secondly, we notice that she obeyed her cousin, Mordecai, implicitly, trusting his godly wisdom. How good it was for her and the Jews, that such a man existed. God always had His man (or woman) in the right place at the right time! Through Mordecai, Esther was able to move in a course that was right and prosperous for the nation to which they both belonged.

Notice the closing verses of **chapter 2**. Two stewards of the king's household would have assassinated their king, but Mordecai discovered the plot and passed the information to Esther, who informs the King in Mordecai's name. The men were hanged, but more important to the story, Mordecai's name went down in the records as the saviour of Ahasuerus's life. When God wants something remembered and recorded, He sees this is done. No one at that time saw the Hand that directed the hand that wrote the records. Let us close this first lesson by reflecting on the fact that in the darkest days for His own people, God has His servants ready to do His work. He used the beauty of Esther and the faithfulness of Mordecai to further His purposes. Remember – He can use you too, if you will let Him.

Study 2

Mordecai the Jew

Esther 2: 5-10; Chapters 4 & 10

The central figure of action recorded in the Book of Esther is Mordecai the Jew. When I come to the end of the book, I always feel that it is he that has made history, not Esther. She assumed importance because of the deep concern of this man for the well being of his people. **Chapter 10 verse 2** tells us that a record was kept of his power and mighty acts. God was not going to let them be forgotten. We can reckon Mordecai among the greatest of the Bible characters, although possibly we do not often think of him in this light. Abraham and Joseph, David and Paul are in the front line. I am sure that their histories and characters take precedence in our knowledge and estimation. I am just as sure, however, that we shall benefit from getting to know Mordecai better. He played a vital part in the history of the Jewish nation. Without him they would have perished disastrously at the time we are now considering.

It is encouraging to know that God has His man for every emergency. Let the days be as dark as they can be. Let the people of God be as indifferent and sinful as perhaps it is possible for them to be. Let God seem so far away that His Name is not even mentioned. Yet His man is there in the right place at the right time. If you look through Scripture you will find this happens time and time again. Joseph was around in Egypt just when a leader was needed to shape the foundations of the nation of Israel. Eventually God placed him near the throne. Daniel was at hand in Babylon when God needed someone to look after His interest in captivity. He was right there – God used him. Let us take courage from this glorious fact that God never lets things get out of hand. Mordecai was His man (and Esther was His woman) for the time in which they lived.

We notice the **CARE** of Mordecai for the interests of his own people. Each day he was found at the gate of the palace. While Esther was preparing to meet the king, Mordecai walked before her apartments every day. (**2: 11**) He took on the responsibilities of the father she had lost. Thus he was able to advise her wisely and she obeyed him absolutely. In **chapter 4** we find his care for the Jews themselves. He rends his clothes when he learns of the danger of the nation from their enemy, Haman. As you read, you will notice the underlying sense of Mordecai's influence in every movement of the book. When he is finally honoured and he reaches the place of power with the king, we read that he is still seeking the good of his people, (**10: 3**) I also like to notice that he even cared about the well being of the king. In **2: 21-23**, the plot to murder Ahasuerus was foiled because of Mordecai's care and watchfulness. God can use people who care – care about His interest and care for the good of others. In a selfish world it is good to realise how much can be achieved through those who are dedicated to God and to His service. This is one lesson we can learn from Mordecai.

Then we can see the **COURAGE** of Mordecai. God has said that those who honour Him, He will honour. Mordecai's relationship with God is never mentioned. We do not read of him that he prayed three times a day as Daniel did. In fact we never read about prayer at all in the book. We read of fasting and weeping, (**4: 3**) but no prayer, yet doubtless the fasting would have involved prayer as well. Yet Mordecai's faith is plain and his way of life undoubtedly sprang from his loyalty to God.

In **chapter 3** we have the greatest example of his courage. Haman, the Agagite, who was to be known as the Jews'

enemy, was advanced to a position of supremacy in the kingdom and all were commanded to make obeisance to him. Mordecai refused (**3: 2**) and gave no recognition to Haman. His worship was reserved for God alone and he maintained his loyalty in this way. Haman was so angered by this, that he would have had the whole Jewish nation destroyed. Mordecai's second act of courage was to so instruct Esther, that she gained the favour of the king to the saving of their race. (**4: 13-17**) It seems that he did not fear the anger of Haman and was willing to face the anger of the king. He was not ashamed to stand alone for what he felt to be right. This lesson is so important for us to learn. It may be that not so much depends on our honouring God as that which hung on the actions of Mordecai. However, it is just as vital that we should stand firm for God at all costs. This takes real courage.

We see then the **COMMITMENT** of Mordecai and the extent to which it worked in his life. Because the king's life was spared, through this care, he became the man whom the king delighted to honour. Haman must have been gnashing his teeth as he found himself heaping on his enemy the honours he had thought were intended for himself. Thus through the unreserved devotion of Mordecai to the needs of God's people, Haman was defeated and the Jewish people were saved. The man, who courageously did what was right, was raised to the place of power. Let us learn this lesson. God honours those who stay faithful to Him at all costs. We need to be steadfast in our purpose to give God first place in our lives.

Study 3

Haman – The Jews' Enemy

Esther chapters 3 and 5

The main plot of the story of Esther is woven around the part that Haman played in the fortunes of the Jewish race. We have looked at the place Esther took in the unfolding drama. As Queen, she enjoyed the remarkable favour of Ahasuerus, the king. This was used in a wonderful way for the salvation of the nation. Then we considered the way of Mordecai the Jew, who honoured his God and cared so deeply for the affairs of the nation. That such a man should be raised to the position in the land of second only to the king, is remarkable indeed. Notice in **chapter 10** that the power and might of the king and the greatness of Mordecai are recorded side by side.

Haman becomes known as the Jews' enemy. It is obvious from the whole sequence of events recorded that he hated Mordecai and his people, the Jews. We find that Ahasuerus advanced him above all the princes of the realm. (**3: 1**) To the giddy heights of power he rose and desired that according to the king's command, all should do homage to him. Position and power became his, but pride ruined his life. There was one man who would not bow to Haman – "**but Mordecai would not bow or pay homage.**" (**3: 2**) Each day it was a means of deep mortification and annoyance to Haman, and we read in **verse 5** that Haman was full of wrath. Not only Mordecai, but also his people must be destroyed. **Chapter 3: 9 & 10** relate the treachery of Haman. He would buy from the king an edict that sealed the Jewish nation's doom. Note how he goes about it and eventually the messengers are sent out bearing the evil tidings. On the 13th day of the twelfth month ALL the Jews must be slain. We see the antagonism of this evil man to the Jewish people. They must all die!

We can pause here for a moment and consider the position that the Jews held among the nations. If you read **Deuteronomy 7: 6-11**, you will notice how God viewed them. They were a

holy people, chosen by Him, and He loved them. This was not because they were great in number and mighty in strength, or because they were, in themselves, special. It was because God had chosen them to be the object of His special favour and love. He intended them to be great – The greatest nation in the world. The well-being of the nation depended on obedience to God's laws. They must make Him altogether their God. Alas, they failed, and time and time again they were under the heel of an oppressing nation. This is where we find them in the time of Esther. Yet the strange thing about them is that as a nation they never lost their identity. This is true even today. Millions of Jews have been persecuted and killed – yet the race still survives. 'Reborn in a day' in 1948, today there is even stronger evidence than ever before that Israel is a nation apart. One day ALL the prophecies concerning them are going to be fulfilled.

We have thought of the advancement of Haman. Then we noticed his antagonism towards the Jews as their enemy. Now we look at his actions. He set in motion, forces designed to destroy these people. Mordecai's refusal to bow to him was iron in his soul. I am sure Haman knew that this attitude was typical not only of Mordecai, but of the Jewish people as a whole. It has always been this very refusal to bow to heathen forces, that has set this nation apart. There were three great movements in the story of Haman's defeat.

1. He sought powers to destroy the Jews.

Notice how this was defeated by the fervent efforts of Mordecai. I like his words to Esther in **4: 13-14**. After telling her the perils of remaining silent, he says, **"Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"** Esther was the only one of her people with access to the king, and she had not been summoned to him for a month. The only way open was the dangerous step of going to him unbidden. Anxiously she agreed to take this risk. The hour of peril was the hour of opportunity! But she would only go forward if all her people were united in their purpose. **(4: 15 & 16)** How often this principle has been true in the history of the Christian Church. Persecution and peril unites! Petty differences and minor squabbles are cast aside in the face of the common enemy. But how sad that God has often to allow troubles and trials to assail His people in order to bring them into a closer relationship with each other and with Himself. Think about this carefully! How good that it stirred up in Esther the courage to act! It was wonderful how bravely she went in to obtain the favour of the king (**Chapter 5**) knowing the consequence of failure. **"If I perish, I perish,"** she said. **(4: 16)**

2. The pride of Haman in pursuing a course for the murder of Mordecai.

Chapter 5: 14 tells how he had gallows erected to hang this Jew. How much Mordecai annoyed Haman is seen by this. I like the interlude in **Chapter 6** – a sleepless night for a king led to a reward for Mordecai's devotion, which had resulted in the deliverance of the king. The question is asked, **"What shall be done for the man whom the King delights to honour?" (6: 6)** What divine irony is seen here! In his pride, Haman had unwittingly paved the way for the exaltation of the lowly Mordecai. This would teach us the lesson that the Lord Jesus Himself taught, **"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14: 11)**

3. The pursuits of Haman were shown in all their ugly reality at Esther's banquet Chapter 7.

It was there that Haman was exposed and deposed, and was eventually hanged on the gallows he had had erected for Mordecai. Note what his wife and the wise men had said

to him in **6: 13** **"If Mordecai is of Jewish descent, before whom you have begun to fall, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him."** How true this proved to be! It was indeed an historic statement. Down through the centuries, those who have treated the Jews badly, have eventually been destroyed themselves. Hitler, the German dictator, defeated himself when he laid his hand on God's chosen people. Many, for the very same reason, have shared the fate of Haman. He failed to realise the love and care that God has for His people. No one can really finally destroy those who belong to God.

Study 4 The Unmentioned God

Esther 9: 20-23

Esther is the only book in the Bible where the name of God is not mentioned. It is quite staggering to realise that a story that has so much to do with the well-being and preservation of God's chosen race, should be completely without reference to His name. As you read it you will, no doubt, notice the strange intermingling of those who are pagans and, according to Jewish law, outside of God's promises and covenant, with those who were part of the Jewish nation. Here we have Esther, the Jewess, becoming queen to a Persian monarch, and her cousin, Mordecai, rising to power and influence in the same court. Of course this was not the first time in the history of their nation that such things had happened. In the case of Joseph, we see him sharing the power of the throne of Pharaoh of Egypt, and marrying a daughter of Potipherah, **(Genesis 41: 45)** In the case of Daniel we see him accepting honour in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar and enjoying a place of prominence in his kingdom. It is worth thinking carefully about these things and comparing them with one another.

God is not mentioned, but His people are preserved and in this book we have the origin of the Jewish feast of Purim. In our reading, we have details of the way in which Mordecai wrote to all the Jews, in all the provinces of the kingdom of Persia, letting them to keep the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar, as a memorial to the great deliverance of the Jews from the wicked Haman. It was called Purim after the thought of 'Pur' – the lot which was cast by Haman to destroy the nation. This was to be a yearly feast and it was to be an occasion of great joy and gladness. So the fast called by Mordecai in **Chapter 4** is answered by the feast called by him in **Chapter 9**.

It is evident that the habit among the Jewish people was to fast and repent in times of trouble, although we do not read here of an actual returning to God. On this occasion it led to deliverance from their enemies and brought about the commemoration of the event in the feast or Purim. This is an important feature of the book of Esther, for even to this day the Jews celebrate Purim, reading the book of Esther aloud, and remembering many more recent miracles of deliverance. It would be helpful for you to look at **Leviticus Chapter 23**, for this is the chapter that deals with the set feasts of the Lord enjoined upon the people of Israel. They were important to the nation and had much to teach them. God not mentioned! We cannot say, however, that He was not at work. We sometimes speak of 'providence', and by it we mean the overruling of God in the circumstances of life. Being a Christian is not a hit-or-miss affair, with everything open to chance. It is such stories as that of Esther that we learn that God need not be described, or even mentioned, for His work to be in evidence. He often 'moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform'. There are three pairs of events that show His

over-ruling providence in the unfolding of this story.

1. The fall of Vashti and the rise of Esther to favour with the king.

When Vashti rebelled against the king, she did something that was previously unheard of in the realm. Why did she do it just then? Well of course we do not know her personal motive. It just seems such a coincidence that it should happen then. But was it? My own belief is that the interest of Mordecai and the presence of Esther in the kingdom just then prove that an unseen Hand was ordering events. Out of all the beauties of the province, the beautiful young Esther was outstanding. Thus this young Jewish girl is exalted to the throne of Persia. It teaches us that God puts down one here and elevates another there in order to fulfil His purposes. She was indeed brought to the kingdom for such a time as this!

2. The plot to assassinate the king, and Mordecai's discovery of it.

It is recorded and apparently forgotten until the king has a sleepless night. To some extent the whole book pivots on this one point. Doubtless there were many such attempts on the life of the king, and their discovery could have gone unnoticed. Yet this particular recording of events led to the exaltation of Mordecai – God's man for the day. Upon this, the triumph of God's plan, so much depended. A sleepless night! How wonderful that such an insignificant matter should pave the way for the fulfilment of God's will concerning His people.

3. The clash between one who hated God's people and one who loved them well.

Haman rises to power, and in that exaltation his pride and arrogance are displayed. All was well until he stretched out his hand to touch God's people. In the exaltation of Mordecai we see the lifting up of one who humbly sought God's interests. The prophet Zechariah says, concerning God's own people, "**He who touches you touches the apple of His eye,**" (**Zechariah 2: 8**) Haman fell, and the gallows he had erected for Mordecai was the instrument for his own execution. What a reversal of events by the UNSEEN hand of God!

As we conclude these studies, let us remember that we can find God in all the ways of life, if we look for Him. He never makes a mistake, and His purposes never fail. That is why it is so important to entrust our lives to Him. **Proverbs 3: 5-6** give us the guidelines for a happy, secure life. I hope you have enjoyed your studies in Esther. There is so much more that you can get from the book if you will take the time to study it deeper for yourself. In closing, read **Romans 11: 33-36**.

Questions

Study 1: Esther and The king

1. Why did Ahasuerus make this feast in **chapter 1**?
2. Why did Vashti's refusal to appear at the feast cause such a stir?
3. In what way is the book of Esther unique among the books of the Bible?
4. Give two factors that laid the foundation for the advancement of Esther.
5. What evidence is there in **chapters 1 and 2** to show that God was working through these events?

Study 2: Mordecai the Jew

1. Why is Mordecai so important to both the history of the Jewish nation and to the Christian Church?
2. What recurring factor is there in the Scriptures to show that God never allows things to get out of hand?
3. Which characteristic above all others in the life of Mordecai, make it possible for God to use him?
4. How does Mordecai's attitude to Haman reflect his loyalty to God?
5. What lesson have you learnt from the life of Mordecai?

Study 3: Haman - The Jew's enemy

1. Give a brief character sketch of Haman.
2. How does God view the Jews, according to **Deuteronomy 7**?
3. Why was Esther's part in the story so vital at this time?
4. Comment on the statement, "Persecution and peril unites!"
5. What was the real cause of Haman's failure and fall?

Study 4: The Unmentioned God

1. What is the significance of the Jewish feast of Purim?
2. What is meant by 'The Providence of God'? Give examples to illustrate your answer.
3. On which event can the book of Esther be said to pivot, and why?
4. Give two of the feasts mentioned in **Leviticus 23**, with brief description of their significance.
5. What part of this study of the book of Esther has been the most blessing to you personally?