

Esther

A Suggested Outline of Esther

- I. The Selection of Esther (1–2)
 - A. The king loses Vashti (1)
 - B. The king chooses Esther (2)

- II. The Detection of Haman (3–7)
 - A. Haman's evil plot (3)
 - B. Mordecai's great concern (4)
 - C. Esther's courageous intercession (5–7)

- III. The Protection of Israel (8–10)
 - A. The king's new decree (8)
 - B. The Jews' new victory (9)
 - C. Mordecai's new honor (10)

Introductory Notes to Esther

I. The Book

The events recorded in Esther take place between Ezra 6 and 7. The “third year of Ahasuerus” (1:3) would be 483 B.C. “Ahasuerus” is the title of the Persian ruler, just as Pharaoh was the title of the Egyptian ruler. The book nowhere mentions the name of God, while the name of the king is mentioned at least twenty-eight times! The Jewish rabbis have found the name “Jehovah” hidden in five different verses in the original Hebrew (1:20; 5:4, 13; 7:5, 7). Though Jehovah's name is not mentioned, His overruling providence is seen in every chapter of the book. “Esther” means “star”; “Hadassah,” her Jewish name, means “myrtle” (2:7).

II. The Theme

Esther tells how the Jewish nation was rescued from extinction. It explains the origin of one of the Jews' most festive holidays, the Feast of Purim. The word “Purim” means “lots,” and refers to the casting of lots by Haman to determine the day of the slaughter of

the Jews (9:26–31; 3:7). Purim is held the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the last month of the Jewish calendar (our Feb.–March). It is usually preceded by a fast on the thirteenth day in memory of Esther's fast (4:16). That evening the Book of Esther is read publicly in the synagogue. Each time the name of Haman is read, the Jews stamp on the floor, hiss, and cry, "Let his name be blotted out!" The next day, they again meet at the synagogue for prayers and the reading of the Law. The rest of the day and the next day are given over to great rejoicing, feasting, and giving gifts. There is no OT authorization from God for this feast, but the Jews have been observing it faithfully for centuries.

III. A Spiritual Lesson

In Esther, we see once again Satan's hatred for the Jews. Had Haman succeeded in his plot, the Jewish nation would have been exterminated! Think of what this would have meant to God's gracious covenant with Abraham. Any man or nation that has tried to wipe out the Jews has failed, as did Haman. See Gen. 12:1–3. Since God declared war on Satan (Gen. 3:15), Satan and his seed have been fighting against Christ and His seed: Cain killed Abel; Pharaoh sought to drown the Jews; Haman plotted to destroy Israel; Herod tried to slay Christ. We have here also an illustration of the warfare between the flesh and the Spirit (Gal. 5:16–23). Haman was a descendant of the Amalekites, the archenemies of the Jews (compare Es. 3:1 with Deut. 25:17–19; Ex. 17:8–16; and 1 Sam. 15). Amalek symbolized the flesh, and Haman, being in that family, pictures to us the hostility of the flesh against the Spirit, as well as the children of Satan vs. the children of God.

IV. God's Providence

God's name is nowhere seen in this book, but God's hand is nowhere missing! He is "standing somewhere in the shadows" ruling and overruling. As you study the book, note the following evidences of God's providential workings: (1) Esther being chosen queen over all the other candidates, 2:15–18; (2) Mordecai discovering the plot to kill the king, 2:21–23; (3) the casting of lots for the day to destroy the Jews resulting in a date late in the year, giving time for Mordecai and Esther to act, 3:7–15; (4) the king's welcome to Esther after ignoring her for a month, 5:2; (5) the king's patience with Esther in permitting her to hold another banquet, 5:8; (6) the king's insomnia that brought to light Mordecai's deed of kindness, 6:1ff; (7) the king's apparent lapse of memory in 6:10–14, that led him to honor one of the Jews he had agreed to slay; (8) the king's deep concern for Esther's welfare, when he had a harem to choose from, 7:5ff.

V. The Dates

The king in the Book of Esther is Xerxes, the son of Darius I, Darius the Great. He ruled the Persian empire from 486 to 465 B.C. Vashti was dethroned in the third year of his reign (1:3), which would be 483. History tells us that Xerxes held a great feast for his princes in that year in preparation for his invasion of Greece. The campaign lasted until 479 and was a disaster. It was probably his shame and defeat that led Xerxes to wish

he had not deposed Vashti. Esther was made queen in the seventh year of his reign (2:16), the year 479. It was in the twelfth year of his reign that the plot of Haman was hatched (3:7), the year 474; so Esther had been queen about five years when Haman went to work. Xerxes was assassinated in 465.

VI. Esther and Proverbs

There is an interesting parallel between some verses in Proverbs and the events in Esther. Look up these references: Prov. 16:33 with Es. 3:7; Prov. 16:18 with Es. 5:9–14; Prov. 11:8 with Es. 7:10; Prov. 21:2 with Es. 5:1–4.

VII. Haman and the Antichrist

Many Bible students see in wicked Haman a picture of the future Antichrist who will persecute the Jews and seek to destroy them. The phrase “this wicked Haman” in 7:6 adds up to 666 in the original Hebrew, and this is the number of the Beast (Rev. 13:18). Haman plotted his murders secretly while appearing to be friendly to the Jews openly; Antichrist will make a covenant with Israel for seven years, but break it after half that time. Haman possessed tremendous power, given to him by the king; the Beast will possess great power, given to him by Satan. Haman's pride was obvious, for he wanted all men to bow down to him; the Beast will cause all men to worship him and his image. Haman hated the Jews, and Antichrist will hate the Jews. But Haman was doomed, even though for a time he seemed to have power. Satan's masterpiece, the Beast, will appear to be indestructible, but Christ will destroy him and his followers when He returns.

VIII. The Courage of Esther

Some have criticized Esther for her seeming lack of concern over the plight of the Jews. It is true that when Mordecai first began to fast and mourn, Esther sought to change his mind (4:1–4). But we must keep in mind that Esther was rather isolated from the actual affairs of court and had not been in the king's presence for a month. Once she did get the news of the danger at hand, she was willing to cooperate with Mordecai. Certainly she was taking her life in her hands, for Xerxes was a creature of his moods, and he could kill Esther just as easily as he deposed Vashti! While at the beginning Esther did not display the same faith in God's covenant that Mordecai did, as the events continued, she turned out to be a courageous woman with strong faith in God. It is interesting to note that as long as Esther was out of contact with Mordecai, everything went badly for the Jews, but when she started obeying Mordecai's word, everything turned out well for the Jews.

Esther 1–4

These first four chapters of the book introduce us to the four main characters in the drama.

I. Ahasuerus the King (1)

As mentioned before, "Ahasuerus" was the title of the Persian ruler; his given name was Xerxes, and he ruled from 486 to 465 B.C. History tells us that he was an impulsive ruler, and we can see this displayed in the Book of Esther. Note how quickly the king gave great authority to Haman and then forgot what his decree involved! Note too how impulsively he put away his lovely wife, and then later regretted it.

A. The banquet (vv. 1–12).

This royal affair was for the purpose of conferring with his chiefs and leaders in preparation for his war against Greece. Xerxes had put down a rebellion in Egypt and felt confident he could conquer the Greeks. The gathering lasted for 180 days; the huge banquet was at the end of that period. This was in Xerxes' third year, or 483 B.C. The Medes and Persians were in power as Daniel had prophesied (Dan. 2:36ff). The feast lasted for seven days (v. 5) in the king's beautiful garden. Of course, there was drinking, and each guest was permitted as much as he wanted. The women, following a Persian practice, had a separate banquet. Anxious to please his guests, Xerxes asked the queen to come to the men's banquet, but Vashti refused. (The name "Vashti" means "beautiful woman.") Vashti knew the king and his guests were under the influence of wine and that the banquet hall was no place for a woman, especially a queen.

B. The banishment (vv. 13–22).

The king was stunned by Vashti's public refusal to cater to his whims. He turned to his wise men for counsel. (You will note in this book that Xerxes listened to the advice of many people. History tells us he was a "puppet" with several of his chiefs pulling the strings.) The men advised him to depose Vashti and make her a public example to the entire nation. The Persian "postal system" was perhaps the finest in the ancient world. It operated somewhat like the old pony express, with fresh horses and riders waiting at various points along the route. The king hoped that his decree would strengthen the homes of the land. Whether it did or not, nobody knows. We do know that he later regretted his decision.

II. Esther the Queen (2)

Between chapters 1 and 2, at least four years pass, during which Xerxes went on his disastrous Greek campaign (481–479). He came home a bitter man, and it was only natural that he should seek some kind of comfort in his own home. But then he remembered that Vashti had been dethroned and he was without a queen. Of course, he had many women available in his harem, but he missed his beautiful queen. The counselors advised him to seek another queen. (If Vashti had gotten back on the throne,

she might have punished her husband's counselors.) Thus began the great search for the ideal queen, and this is where Esther comes in.

Esther and Mordecai were cousins; Mordecai had raised her like his own daughter. Mordecai was known at the palace and probably held some minor office, for we find him seated at the gate. He advised Esther to "enter the contest" but not to make known the fact that she was a Jewess. This meant that Esther probably had to eat unclean foods and break some of the OT laws; otherwise she could not have held her own among her Gentile competitors. (However, see Daniel's experience in Dan. 1.) Does this mean that "the end justifies the means"? Of course, these laws were temporary rules and not basic, eternal laws involving salvation, but they were still the Word of God. However, we are not to judge, for Esther did prove herself a courageous woman. After a year of special preparation (v. 12), Esther was presented to the king—and chosen! Verse 15 says that "she required nothing"; that is, she did not decorate herself with gaudy jewels as did the other women. She depended on her beauty and her character; see 1 Peter 3:3–4. She was made queen in the year 479 and a great feast was held in her honor. In vv. 21–23 we have what appears to be a minor incident, but later it becomes an important matter. Perhaps these men tried to slay the king because they disapproved of his treatment of Vashti.

III. Haman the Enemy (3)

Five years pass (v. 7) and Satan begins to work. Haman's promotion went to his head and turned him into a murderer. Being a faithful Jew, Mordecai would not bow down to Haman, and this made the proud ruler excessively angry. The palace knew Mordecai was a Jew (v. 6) but they did not know that Esther was one also. Haman decided to destroy *all* the Jews just because of his malice toward Mordecai. Satan is the destroyer Apollyon (Rev. 9:11). Haman and his fortune-tellers cast lots ("pur" in Hebrew) to find what day should be set aside for the execution, and it fell nearly a year later! Haman then offered to get for the king over \$25,000,000 in silver if the king would authorize the slaying of the Jews. Haman lied about the Jews, of course, for Satan is both a liar and a murderer. Foolishly, Xerxes gave Haman his ring and the authority to act, not realizing that he was risking the life of his own queen. Haman wasted no time, for that very month he had the decrees written and sent out (vv. 7, 12), ordering the Persians to destroy, kill, and plunder all the Jews in the vast reaches of the kingdom. It is difficult to see how the king could make a law to wipe out millions of people one minute, then sit down to eat and drink the next minute (v. 15). But dictators in our modern history have done the same thing. (For additional material about Haman, consult the Introductory Notes.)

IV. Mordecai the Protector (4)

The Jew that sat at the king's gate now comes to the fore; he is God's prepared vessel to save the nation. Immediately, Mordecai went into mourning publicly, even at the king's gate! He was not ashamed of his people or his God, although he had counseled Esther to hide her nationality. No doubt he became quite a "pest" as he sat at the gate and "cried with a loud and bitter cry." Esther sent him some new clothes and suggested

that he stop, but he sent her the explanation for his actions. Esther in the palace was not likely to know all the policies and politics going on, and she had not seen the king for a month (v. 11). Mordecai sent her a copy of the decree that she might realize how desperate the situation really was. We see here two kinds of saints: those who are in joy because they are ignorant of what is going on, and those who are in sorrow because they know the signs of the times.

Is Esther making excuses in v. 11 or merely explaining the situation? Certainly she must have realized that she was the only one who could save the Jews. Keep in mind that Esther probably knew nothing about Haman's true character. Haman was a favorite of the king, and Esther would have no reason to doubt his sincerity. Mordecai reminded her that she would not escape death even in the palace. He added, "If you hold your peace, God will send deliverance some other way!" Mordecai knew God's covenant with Abraham, that He would never allow the nation to perish.

We must admire Esther's sensible, spiritual reaction: she asked for prayer! She realized that entering into the king's presence could mean death, but she presented herself as a "living sacrifice" to do God's will. "If I perish, I perish!" was not the desperate cry of a martyr; it was the testimony of a believer willing to give all for her God. See Dan. 3:13–18. Esther was now forced to reveal her people. You cannot hide the light under the bushel very long! Esther in the OT and Joseph of Arimathaea in the NT (John 19:38–42) were both "hidden believers" whom God had placed in special circumstances to perform a special ministry. (The word "secretly" in John 19:38 is literally "secreted." God had hidden him for the special purpose of burying the body of Jesus.)

We cannot help but see a modern spiritual application of these chapters. Satan is the destroyer, and millions of people are going to go to hell unless somebody rescues them. Some Christians are like the king—eating and drinking and enjoying life, unconcerned about the danger. Others, like Mordecai, are deeply concerned to save the condemned people. And there are the Esthers too who sacrifice themselves to intercede on behalf of the lost. Which are you?

Esther 5–10

The events in these chapters center around three feasts.

I. A Feast of Rejoicing (5–6)

The Jews have fasted and prayed with Esther for three days; it is now time to step out by faith and intercede before the king's throne. Keep in mind that Oriental rulers were almost like gods to their people, and their commands, right or wrong, were obeyed. Esther was taking her life in her hands, but she had already put her life into God's hands. No sooner did she appear at the entrance to the throne room than the king lifted his golden scepter and called her in! "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord!" (Prov. 21:1) Acting very wisely, Esther did not immediately tell Xerxes her true request. Instead, she invited him and Haman to a banquet that very day. She knew the king's

weakness for food and drink and, with womanly intuition, she prepared him for the important request. Furthermore, she gave Haman a false feeling of security by including him. After several full courses of food, the time would come for the wine course, a time when the king would be exceptionally happy. He knew that Esther had a matter on her heart, so he asked about it. But the wise queen delayed another day, and the king yielded to her wishes. Haman went home elated, puffed up with pride that he should enjoy such an exclusive banquet with royalty. But his peace and security were not to last long; like the lost sinner today, Haman was already under condemnation.

Only one thing ruined the day for Haman: he had to see the Jew Mordecai at the gate, and Mordecai refused to bow down to him. In his proud wrath, Haman decided to trump up some charge against Mordecai and have him executed. Like Adam, Haman listened to his wife and followed her advice. He had a 75-foot gallows erected, intending to have Mordecai hanged from it. The height of the gallows enabled the whole city to see the victim; in fact, in 7:9–10 the servants of the king seem to indicate the gallows could even be seen from the palace. Haman's fleshly rejoicing was not to last long, for in chapter 6 we find Mordecai finally rewarded for saving the king's life. Perhaps Mordecai had been meditating on Ps. 37:1–15; he knew that God would one day honor him for his good deed. But think of how humiliated Haman must have been! This event should have humbled him and forced him to change his wicked plans. In fact, his wife even warned him that now he could not overcome the Jews. While Haman and his wife were discussing the matter, the servant came to take Haman to the second banquet.

II. A Feast of Reckoning (7)

The conflict between Haman and Mordecai, and the fact of Haman's eventual downfall, are perfect illustrations of Ps. 37. Read this psalm carefully and see how it fits. Read also Ps. 73. Haman came to the feast, with no doubt some fear and trembling in his heart. It was too late, however; his sin was going to find him out. See Prov. 16:18 and 18:12. The king asked Esther for her request, and this time she opened her heart to plead for the salvation of her people. Note that she uses the very words of the king's decree in v. 4; see 3:13. Undoubtedly, she had often read the decree and "spread it before the Lord." The king was not amazed at discovering she was a Jewess. What did amaze him was that such a wicked man should be in his employ! And the king was even more shocked to discover who the enemy was—Haman! How blind this monarch was to the true character of the people around him. He kept godly and wise Mordecai outside the gate, but he allowed Haman the run of the palace. No wonder the king was assassinated later on.

"The wrath of a king is as messengers of death" (Prov. 16:14). So disturbed was the king that he left the banquet hall and went to the garden. This gave evil Haman opportunity to humble himself before the queen, begging her for mercy. So zealous was Haman in his begging that he fell on the queen's couch, and this was too much for the king. He commanded the man to be executed, and this was done—on the very tree Haman had prepared for Mordecai! "The righteous is delivered from trouble, and it comes to the wicked stead" (Prov. 11:8). The servants were only too glad to obey, for Haman had made many enemies during his selfish, proud administration.

III. A Feast of Remembering (8–10)

Once Haman was out of the way, peace reigned in the palace. Mordecai was given the authority once held by Haman, and by now everyone knew that Esther was a Jewess. One problem remained, however: the king could not cancel his decree and the Jews would be robbed and slain in nine months (compare 8:8 with 3:13). We can certainly see the providence of God in the casting of the lots (3:7), for it left time for the king to get the word of the new decree throughout the empire. Esther once again begged the king to act for the salvation of her people. The king turned to Mordecai and gave him authority to act for him. The new decree permitted the Jews to protect themselves and to destroy anyone in the kingdom who was an enemy of the Jews. The king did not cancel the old law; he merely gave a new law that superseded it. This is true in the Christian life; the law of sin and death has been overcome by the law of the Spirit of life in Christ (Rom. 8:1–12).

Verses 10–14 are a beautiful illustration of spreading the Gospel. This message was a matter of life and death! The scribes hurried and wrote the messages, and the official ambassadors hastened to get the message to every corner of the kingdom. If Christians today would be half as eager to get out the message of the Gospel, more souls would be rescued from eternal death. See Prov. 24:11–12.

Note that many different people were employed in spreading the good news, just as God uses many workers today. Of course, when the Jews heard and believed the message, it brought them joy and deliverance. They knew that the Persians would not dare to fight them and incur the wrath of the king. In fact, many of the Persians “called themselves Jews” to escape punishment!

When the twelfth month arrived (chap. 9), the Jews were ready for victory; they had the edict of the king on their side. Hundreds of the Jews' enemies were slain, including the ten sons of Haman (9:6–10). In the Hebrew Bible, the names of these ten sons are listed in a long column that looks like a gallows! Note that the Jews did not take any spoil (v. 10), although the decree in 8:11 permitted this. Certainly their enemies would have taken the Jews' wealth as the king commanded (3:13), but God's people have to prove themselves better than their enemies. Verse 16 states that 75,000 of their enemies were slain. On the fourteenth day of the month, the Jews rested and rejoiced at God's deliverance. Mordecai felt led to make the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the twelfth month holidays for the Jews to commemorate the great deliverance; and to this day the Jews celebrate the Feast of Purim. Verse 26 explains the meaning of “Purim.” It is the plural of *pur*, which is Hebrew for “lot” (see 3:7). While we have no divine authorization in the OT for this feast, it has been celebrated for centuries and is a testimony to the power of God and the grace of God toward His people.

The book closes reporting the promotion and prosperity of Mordecai, the man of faith who believed God's promises and dared to act. Of course, we dare not forget Esther who gave her all that her people might be saved. The entire Book of Esther is a marvelous testimony of the overruling power and providence of God. Romans 8:28 is illustrated by this book.