

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 12 – For Such a Time as This
Esther

Introduction

The Book of Esther is an amazing historical account of God's deliverance of the Jews during their 70 defenseless, vulnerable years of captivity in Babylon and Medo-Persia. The Babylonians had been overthrown by the Medes and Persians at the time of Esther. The Persian empire spread from India to Ethiopia (also known as Cush), and was divided into 127 provinces in which the Jews lived. A plot was formed to exterminate all the Jews; but God, being faithful in His covenant love for Israel, thwarted this plot. He protected and preserved His people, demonstrating His commitment to them even while disciplining them in captivity.

Although God receives all glory, He rarely acts independently from people's faith, courage and actions. Rather, He often presents opportunities "*for such a time as this*" for His people who are already positioned to move in faith and partnership with Him. And so it was in the account of Esther. The Jews' deliverance was not unlike the Passover deliverance under Moses (Ex ch.12), when God brought the Jews out of Egypt after passing over the homes that had lamb's blood placed on their doors. This began the annual *Feast of Passover*. The 2nd deliverance during Esther's time led to a new feast – the *Feast of Purim* (still celebrated to this day).

A uniqueness of the story is that the *name of God* is not mentioned once in the book of Esther! Yet, there is great emphasis on the *sovereign hand of God* (sovereign: absolute rule & authority) moving throughout the story. He accomplished His purposes and delivered the Jews from annihilation. Throughout the book of Esther, both women and men were actively making decisions based on faith and wisdom, or based on pride and folly; but the hand of God was moving behind the scenes to bring about His will.

The story of Esther took place during the reign of King Ahasuerus (also named Xerxes I, the son of Darius), who reigned from 486 – 465 B.C. as king over the Medo-Persian empire. In these notes, we will refer to this king as Xerxes.

The 180-day Feast: 1:1-9

One of Xerxes' major campaigns was to attack the kingdom of Greece (Greece would eventually overthrow the Medo-Persian empire and powerfully rule the earth, as the prophet Daniel predicted). The 180-day festival was intended to prepare the nation for the military campaign against Greece. All the nobles and military commanders from the 127 provinces of the kingdom were called to Susa the capitol, for the festival - a massive "tour-de-force" on the part of Xerxes to impress them and inspire confidence in his leadership among his military leaders.

"For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty" (1:4).

Xerxes' extravagant self-promotion was followed by a feast.

"... the king gave a banquet lasting 7 days, in the palace garden... for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa (1:5). Wine was served in goblets of gold... and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality... each man was served as he wished" (1:7,8).

Queen Vashti deposed: 1:9-22

Queen Vashti his wife, also held a 7-day banquet for the women in the royal palace of Xerxes, which indicated her support for her husband's efforts (1:9). Vashti was the most powerful woman in the entire empire, so long as she did not assert her feminine strengths and dignity that might bring shame to her boastful husband, who was a true man of folly and pride.

The turning point in the opening story came when Queen Vashti refused to be "objectified" by her husband on the 7th and last day of the banquet. She knew that her beauty as his wife would be the crowning way that her husband could 'show off' in front of his drunken guests and nobles.

"On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him . . . to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger" (1:10-12).

ANGER AND FOLLY- The book of Proverbs addresses this issue, as well as the added impact of alcohol when angry. King Xerxes is a perfect example of the truths and warnings Proverbs gives.

“Fools show their annoyance at once, but the prudent overlook an insult (12:16).

“It is not for kings, O Lemuel... it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink” (his mother’s advice, 31:4).

“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (16:18).

“Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls” (25:28).

The Greek historian Herodotus helps us understand why Vashti refused to submit to the king’s demands for this “beauty pageant.” *Herodotus depicts Ahasuerus (Xerxes) as an impatient, hot-tempered monarch with a wandering eye for women . . . a king who not only tried to have an affair with his brother’s wife, but also did have an affair with her daughter (Edwin Yamauchi).*

Vashti’s courage to hang on to her feminine dignity, by refusing to be paraded before the king’s drunken nobles is profound. She was not afraid of his anger, or its outcome. She had obviously already tolerated her husband’s sexual escapades, including his harem. But this time she felt led to draw a line on her husband’s pride and folly. She had seen his temper and impetuous actions repeatedly, so her courage to decline was with the knowledge that she would most likely pay the highest price – her crown. As a Persian, it is unlikely that she was a believer in Yahweh, Israel’s God, yet she still possessed profound courage.

*Courage is doing what we believe is the right thing, regardless of the outcome. Courage is God-given to all because we are all made in God’s image and He is a courageous God. As a believer in God (O.T.), and His Son Jesus Christ (N.T.), we have an extra measure of courage from His Holy Spirit who dwells within us from the time we believe. Paul reminded Timothy his disciple that **“God did not give us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power...” (1Timothy 1:7)**. We will see that Esther and her older cousin Mordecai possessed this kind of courage. Ask God to reveal areas of fear that are keeping you from living out your convictions with courage. Ask Him to enlarge His courage-building power within you, so that you do not fear the outcomes of your obedience to God.*

Xerxes consulted with his 7 highest advisors in the kingdom as to what he should do. They seemed to react in **fear** by greatly exaggerating the possible outcome across the entire empire. Xerxes was the one who had done wrong, not his wife. He never should have demanded her to subject herself to such male folly. But now he and the nobles were in a predicament. Their generalized and exaggerated assumption was that Vashti's actions would empower women of nobility throughout the entire empire to rebel against their husbands: ***"There will be no end of the disrespect and discord" (1:18)***. Xerxes saved face by impetuously following their advice, immediately removing Vashti from her position as queen. In this case God's sovereignty was being exercised behind the human conclusions and the choice to depose Vashti.

Jumping to decisions without careful thought almost always leads to mistakes. It can be driven by pride and shame as in Xerxes' case. The Proverbs give guidance on this issue: "The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but folly is the deception of fools" (14:8). "The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps" (14:15). "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm" (13:20). Do you tend to make hasty decisions without seeking wise counsel? Or without weighing the 'advice' of people? Recall a past hasty decision that cost you in the outcome. Reflect on how you might be making hasty far-reaching decisions, in your current circumstances. Ask God to grow prudence in your life.

It was after this banquet and the deposing of Vashti that Xerxes went to war against Greece and was soundly defeated. He returned to oversee his still intact, but weakened empire. Several years lapsed between the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2, where Esther enters the story.

Esther chosen to be Queen: 2:1-18

Four years had elapsed since Xerxes deposed Vashti. ***"He remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her" (2:1)***. This indicates his regret over his impulsive decision to remove her. His nobles proposed that they find a new queen for him by holding a kind of ***"The Bachelor"*** contest. Eligible young virgins from all over the empire would be selected (without their choice to refuse), to contest for the king's favor to become his next queen. This is how the key characters, Mordecai and Esther, entered the story.

“Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai . . . who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon . . . Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died” (2:5-7).

Esther was a lowly Jewish orphan, on the opposite end of the spectrum from Queen Vashti. She had been loved well and trained in wisdom, faith and social graces by her kind ‘adopted father.’ Esther was respectful and obedient to Mordecai, and learned much under his care. When the king’s edict went out for beautiful virgins to be taken into his harem, Esther was chosen. Had she refused to be taken, she probably would have been killed, so she went ‘by faith’ and God’s sovereignty was soon at work in the harem. She was warned by her ‘father’ to not let anyone know that she was a Jewess. She was careful to obey his warning. Each young woman was given one year of beauty treatments before she was taken to the king for a night. Esther was noticed by Hegai who oversaw the harem, and prepared each virgin for the king. Esther quickly won Hegai’s favor and he provided her with extra special beauty treatments, food and 7 maids during the 12-month period of preparation. Hegai’s favor was another example of God’s hand at work for His purposes. When it came time for Esther to be presented to Xerxes, she won his favor and was selected to be his next queen.

“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. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther’s banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality” (2:17,18).

Esther was careful to not reveal her nationality as a Jew to Xerxes. Mordecai may have feared that Esther’s Jewish heritage would cause her to be rejected by Xerxes. Mordecai was taken into the king’s service as a guard at the palace gate, keeping his Jewish identity concealed as well. Mordecai’s wisdom and their prudence were key factors later in the events of God’s deliverance.

Mordecai uncovers a plot against Xerxes: 2:19-23

Another key background detail is that *Mordecai overheard a plot by 2 officers to assassinate Xerxes*. He reported this plot to Esther who, in turn, told Xerxes. The assassins were hung on the gallows and Mordecai's role in uncovering this plot was *recorded in the king's books*. Mordecai was not acknowledged for his protection of the king, and would not be honored by the king for 5 more years (6:2,3)! Yet, God's exact timing would reveal His sovereign purpose at a critical point in the narrative.

How often do we all question **"Where are you God?"** when we don't see God 'visibly' at work on our finite clock. Mordecai is a great eg. for us all, of quiet trust and humility. He didn't promote himself to make sure he was honored, nor did he doubt God's justice. He lived out the command written in the N.T. - "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that HE may exalt you at the proper time" (1Peter 5:6). JESUS gave assurance for each of us to claim: "My Father is always working and I myself am also working" (John 5:17). We please God by believing that He is a rewarder of those who wait for Him, but the timing is up to God, not us. We need to humble ourselves and leave the purposes of God with our lives and our loved ones up to His control. Our responsibility is to be humble and thankful that we know that God is at work. Then join Him in praying for what is on our heart. In what areas to you need to release your judgmental attitude towards God? Don't grow weary in prayer! (Luke 18:1)

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews: 3:1-15

Haman was elevated to be the head over *all* the king's officials. People bowed down to Haman; but Mordecai would not bow down, finally revealing his reason: he was a Jew. Haman despised Mordecai wanting revenge toward all the Jewish people.

There is an interesting reason for why Mordecai chose to not bow down to Haman. Haman's was an Amalekite, age-old enemies of the Jews. The Amalekites had attacked the Jews from the rear, when they were vulnerable after 1st arriving in Canaan from Egypt (Ex. 17:8-15). God declared war on them and King Saul (a Benjamite), Israel's 1st king, was to completely eradicate them, but he disobeyed (1Sam.15). Mordecai was also a Benjamite, and most likely was exercising his desire to honor God's command to not be aligned with the Amalekites. (*W. Wiersbe gives great detail in his excellent O.T. History commentary on Esther, p.716*).

Haman began to scheme how he would destroy all the Jews in the entire kingdom; but he needed Xerxes' permission to do so.

Then Haman said to King Xerxes, “There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king’s laws; it is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king’s administrators for the royal treasury” (3:8,9).

Haman was deceitful and exaggerated his facts to make his case to sway Xerxes. He did not tell Xerxes who the ‘*certain people dispersed throughout the empire*’ were. This would elevate Xerxes fears and suspicions. Haman made it sound like these people were causing the king trouble all over the empire, which was a lie. In fact, God had commanded the Jews through the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 29:4-7), to settle down in captivity and NOT cause trouble for their rulers. They were obeying this. Xerxes, known for making hasty decisions, was still unaware of Esther’s Jewish roots, and signed and sealed the decree authorizing the complete extermination of the Jews on a particular day – the 13th of Adar, (which God’s hand was in, giving the Jews a year to prepare). This decree was speedily taken to every one of the 127 provinces in the kingdom informing the Jews of their fate.

Mordecai appeals to Esther for help: 4:1-17

All Jews, including Mordecai, donned sackcloth and ashes as they wailed over the decree announcing their extinction. A report came to Esther concerning Mordecai’s mourning, leading her to inquire what was happening. Mordecai reported to Esther concerning Haman’s plot. Perhaps God had placed her in her high position to be used “***for such a time as this***”. She would have to intercede on behalf of the Jews to save her people.

“Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS” (4:12-14)?

Previously, Mordecai had commanded Esther to keep her nationality a secret. Now, he told her that it was time to speak up on behalf of her people. Esther responded to Mordecai with honest fear but with great courage and a heart to be used by God. She knew that it would take God's mighty work in Xerxes' heart to receive her when she went to him uninvited.

“Go gather all the Jews in Susa to fast for me. Do not eat or drink for 3 days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I PERISH, I PERISH” (Esther 4:15,16).

Fasting was always accompanied by humbling yourself and confessing sin, and praying that God would see your dependence on Him and desire for His hand, more than food. It is still accepted as the way today.

God delights in using the most 'ordinary' life for His significant purposes. Esther had been in her role as gracious queen for 8 years with no incident. Suddenly, her role to intercede became crucial. She knew she was in that role for the specific opportunity that was before her, to save her people from being annihilated by Haman's vengeance. Never underestimate the importance of your role among other people through all ages and stages of your life. The opportunity to act in faith will present itself IF you are available to be used for God's sovereign purposes. How could your current role be used to serve God's purposes if you are willing? What spiritual discipline is needed to prepare yourself and someone's heart for His work in their life?

Esther approaches Xerxes: 5:1-8

On the third day, Esther approached Xerxes and he gladly welcomed her into his presence. When he asked her to give her request, she invited the king and Haman to a dinner banquet she had prepared for that evening. The king complied and, curiously asked her again what was her request. God's prompting and Esther's intuition must have caused her to sense the timing was not right to raise the grave issue of Haman's plot against her people. She asked that Xerxes and Haman come again the next evening.

Haman's rage against Mordecai: 5:9-14

As Haman departed from the palace, he passed Mordecai who again, did not bow down, causing Haman's rage to strengthen. At

home, he began boasting to his wife and friends about how great he was in the king and queen's sight. Yet, Mordecai's refusal to bow down to honor him was eating him alive!

“But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate” (5:13).

His wife Zeresh advised him to use his authority to cruelly execute Mordecai on a 75-foot high gallows the following day. Haman instantly had the gallows constructed.

Four forces were at work against Haman that he was blind to: 1) Divine sovereignty and the power of prayer (leading to Esther's intuition to wait). 2) His false confidence in his position and why he alone was invited with the king. 3) His pride- boasting at home, building the gallows. Pride is God's #1 hatred, Proverbs 6:16-19. 4) Malice: deep-seated hatred that brings delight if our enemy suffers (Wiersbe, O.T. History p.728-732). Things are not always as they appear! “We walk by faith not by sight” (2Cor.5:7).

Mordecai honored by the king: 6:1-14

God's sovereign hand moves to intervene. That same night, king Xerxes couldn't sleep. He ordered his servants to bring the records of his reign and to read to him. They chose to read how Mordecai had saved the king from an assassination plot (2:19-23).

The king realized that Mordecai had never been rewarded. Early in the morning, Haman went to ask the king permission to *execute Mordecai*. First, Xerxes asked Haman an unexpected question:

“What should be done for the man the king delights to honor” (6:6)?

Proudly, Haman supposed that the king was *intending to honor himself!* He replied, the man to be honored should be led through the city *riding the king's horse, wearing the king's robe, with the king's crest on his head.* The king's next command must have rocked Haman to his core:

“Go at once...Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended” (6:10).

Humiliated, Haman did as the king commanded, leading Mordecai on horseback through the city streets. Afterwards . . .

“Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, ‘Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!’ While they were still talking with him, the king’s eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared” (6:12-14).

The plot revealed, Haman executed: 7:1-10

At the 2nd banquet, Xerxes again asked Esther her request of him. She then revealed Haman’s plot to destroy her and her people:

“If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated” (7:3,4).

She pointed to Haman as the instigator of the plot to annihilate the Jews. The king, enraged at Haman’s deceptive plot, walked out of the meeting to compose himself. Meanwhile, Haman fell before Esther to plead for his life.

“Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, ‘Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?’” (7:8).

Haman was speechless. The king commanded that Haman be immediately executed on the same gallows built for Mordecai. He gave Haman’s entire estate to Esther, and his signet ring to Mordecai (8:2), raising Mordecai to Haman’s position (10:3)!

How quickly events can be turned around by God’s sovereign timing. Wise and humble Mordecai was given all the honor and authority of Haman. But his character was able to handle it. Mordecai cared for the well-being of the people, rather than himself. God knows when we are to be noticed, or given a raise, or recognition. It also may not happen till heaven as with many faithful believers. Do you feel you deserve some recognition that you aren’t receiving? Entrust that desire to God, and remember that He is faithful to reward.

The King’s second edict: 8:1-17

The first royal edict, sealed with the king’s signet ring, to destroy

the Jews could not be revoked. Esther pleaded with Xerxes to issue a 2nd royal edict which he was eager to do, granting the Jews the right to arm and defend themselves on the day when their enemies planned to attack and kill them (the 13th of Adar). They had 9 more months to prepare. Mordecai composed the new edict, sealed and sent it quickly to all 127 provinces. There was jubilation among God's people throughout the kingdom.

“For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. In every province and in every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them” (8:16,17).

The Feast of Purim established: 9:1-32

As a result of the 2nd decree of Xerxes, the Jews in every province successfully defended themselves against their enemies. This led to the establishment of a new, annual Jewish feast called “Purim” (based on the word “Pur” which means, “to cast the lot”). Haman had “cast the lot” to determine the day for the extermination of the Jews; but God had “reversed the lot” so that the day became one of deliverance for the Jews.

“Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor” (9:20-22).

Even to this day, the Feast of Purim is celebrated as a national holiday in Israel.

The exaltation of Mordecai: 10:1-3

The story concludes with the exaltation of Mordecai to 2nd in command in the kingdom of Xerxes.

“Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews” (10:3).

Summary: The book of Esther shows the interplay between God's sovereign activity and human decisions (good and bad).

1. God's Sovereign Activity on Display

"There is no attribute of God more comforting to His children than the doctrine of divine sovereignty." Charles H. Spurgeon (Wiersbe, p.172)

- God is active and in control when He seems to be uninvolved.
- God is faithful, even when it seems that His enemies have usurped His will.
- God is our protector, even when it feels like someone or something is overwhelming us.
- God loves us, even when it seems as if the whole world hates us.
- God delights in humbling the foolish and the proud, and exalting the humble and the wise
- God can cause His people to be noticed and given a place of authority.
- God can direct the thoughts of someone's heart to accomplish His plan.
- God shows His love and involvement even when He disciplines.
- God delights when we fast and pray in dependence on Him.

2. People's Wisdom on Display

- Caring for, or raising the orphans and the vulnerable (Mordecai).
- Obeying our parents when they give us wise advice (Esther).
- Trusting God's protection in difficult circumstances (Esther's year in the harem; Mordecai staying attuned).
- Doing our work well without needing to be honored (Mordecai).
- Having foresight to help another person see their God-given opportunity (Mordecai-Esther was queen for such a time as this).
- Having a 'salting influence' on someone (Esther with Xerxes).
- Having courage to stand for what is right (Vashti, Mordecai).

People's Wisdom cont...

-Having courage to move through fear to faith for the sake of a higher purpose (Esther going before Xerxes without invitation).

-Knowing the power of fasting and prayer and willingly doing it (Esther and all the Jews).

-Knowing the boundary set by God when defending ourselves against an enemy (the Jews didn't initiate fighting, only defended themselves, and they did not plunder those who died).

-Displaying a character that pleases God and influences others-genuine piety, faith, courage, patriotism, compassion, maturity and natural charm (Esther) (*Jensen: Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, p.81*).

-Setting aside days to "remember" and celebrate God's work in our lives (the Jews-Purim).

Discussion Questions

1. Xerxes, Vashti, Mordecai, Esther and Haman are the main people in the account. Who do you identify with and why?
2. What sovereign ways of God encourage you right now in your life-circumstances, and why?
3. What examples from the people of wisdom listed above challenge you? Why?
4. Can you see your God-given purpose in your current role or stage of life? What is it?

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The 180-day Feast: 1:1-9

One of Xerxes' major campaigns was to attack the kingdom of Greece (Greece would eventually overthrow the Medo-Persian empire and powerfully rule the earth, as the prophet Daniel predicted). The 180-day festival was intended to prepare the nation for the military campaign against Greece. All the nobles and military commanders from the 127 provinces of the kingdom were called to Susa the capitol, for the festival - a massive "tour-de-force" on the part of Xerxes to impress them and inspire confidence in his leadership among his military leaders.

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The turning point in the opening story came when Queen Vashti refused to be "objectified" by her husband on the 7th and last day of the banquet. She knew that her beauty as his wife would be the crowning way that her husband could 'show off' in front of his drunken guests and nobles.

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“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (16:18).

“Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls” (25:28).

The Greek historian Herodotus helps us understand why Vashti refused to submit to the king’s demands for this “beauty pageant.” *Herodotus depicts Ahasuerus (Xerxes) as an impatient, hot-tempered monarch with a wandering eye for women . . . a king who not only tried to have an affair with his brother’s wife, but also did have an affair with her daughter (Edwin Yamauchi).*

Vashti’s courage to hang on to her feminine dignity, by refusing to be paraded before the king’s drunken nobles is profound. She was not afraid of his anger, or its outcome. She had obviously already tolerated her husband’s sexual escapades, including his harem. But this time she felt led to draw a line on her husband’s pride and folly. She had seen his temper and impetuous actions repeatedly, so her courage to decline was with the knowledge that she would most likely pay the highest price – her crown. As a Persian, it is unlikely that she was a believer in Yahweh, Israel’s God, yet she still possessed profound courage.

*Courage is doing what we believe is the right thing, regardless of the outcome. Courage is God-given to all because we are all made in God’s image and He is a courageous God. As a believer in God (O.T.), and His Son Jesus Christ (N.T.), we have an extra measure of courage from His Holy Spirit who dwells within us from the time we believe. Paul reminded Timothy his disciple that **“God did not give us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power...” (1Timothy 1:7)**. We will see that Esther and her older cousin Mordecai possessed this kind of courage. Ask God to reveal areas of fear that are keeping you from living out your convictions with courage. Ask Him to enlarge His courage-building power within you, so that you do not fear the outcomes of your obedience to God.*

Xerxes consulted with his 7 highest advisors in the kingdom as to what he should do. They seemed to react in **fear** by greatly exaggerating the possible outcome across the entire empire. Xerxes was the one who had done wrong, not his wife. He never should have demanded her to subject herself to such male folly. But now he and the nobles were in a predicament. Their generalized and exaggerated assumption was that Vashti's actions would empower women of nobility throughout the entire empire to rebel against their husbands: ***"There will be no end of the disrespect and discord" (1:18)***. Xerxes saved face by impetuously following their advice, immediately removing Vashti from her position as queen. In this case God's sovereignty was being exercised behind the human conclusions and the choice to depose Vashti.

Jumping to decisions without careful thought almost always leads to mistakes. It can be driven by pride and shame as in Xerxes' case. The Proverbs give guidance on this issue: "The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but folly is the deception of fools" (14:8). "The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps" (14:15). "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm" (13:20). Do you tend to make hasty decisions without seeking wise counsel? Or without weighing the 'advice' of people? Recall a past hasty decision that cost you in the outcome. Reflect on how you might be making hasty far-reaching decisions, in your current circumstances. Ask God to grow prudence in your life.

It was after this banquet and the deposing of Vashti that Xerxes went to war against Greece and was soundly defeated. He returned to oversee his still intact, but weakened empire. Several years lapsed between the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2, where Esther enters the story.

Esther chosen to be Queen: 2:1-18

Four years had elapsed since Xerxes deposed Vashti. ***"He remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her" (2:1)***. This indicates his regret over his impulsive decision to remove her. His nobles proposed that they find a new queen for him by holding a kind of ***"The Bachelor"*** contest. Eligible young virgins from all over the empire would be selected (without their choice to refuse), to contest for the king's favor to become his next queen. This is how the key characters, Mordecai and Esther, entered the story.

“Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai . . . who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon . . . Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died” (2:5-7).

Esther was a lowly Jewish orphan, on the opposite end of the spectrum from Queen Vashti. She had been loved well and trained in wisdom, faith and social graces by her kind ‘adopted father.’ Esther was respectful and obedient to Mordecai, and learned much under his care. When the king’s edict went out for beautiful virgins to be taken into his harem, Esther was chosen. Had she refused to be taken, she probably would have been killed, so she went ‘by faith’ and God’s sovereignty was soon at work in the harem. She was warned by her ‘father’ to not let anyone know that she was a Jewess. She was careful to obey his warning. Each young woman was given one year of beauty treatments before she was taken to the king for a night. Esther was noticed by Hegai who oversaw the harem, and prepared each virgin for the king. Esther quickly won Hegai’s favor and he provided her with extra special beauty treatments, food and 7 maids during the 12-month period of preparation. Hegai’s favor was another example of God’s hand at work for His purposes. When it came time for Esther to be presented to Xerxes, she won his favor and was selected to be his next queen.

“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. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther’s banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality” (2:17,18).

Esther was careful to not reveal her nationality as a Jew to Xerxes. Mordecai may have feared that Esther’s Jewish heritage would cause her to be rejected by Xerxes. Mordecai was taken into the king’s service as a guard at the palace gate, keeping his Jewish identity concealed as well. Mordecai’s wisdom and their prudence were key factors later in the events of God’s deliverance.

Mordecai uncovers a plot against Xerxes: 2:19-23

Another key background detail is that *Mordecai overheard a plot by 2 officers to assassinate Xerxes*. He reported this plot to Esther who, in turn, told Xerxes. The assassins were hung on the gallows and Mordecai's role in uncovering this plot was *recorded in the king's books*. Mordecai was not acknowledged for his protection of the king, and would not be honored by the king for 5 more years (6:2,3)! Yet, God's exact timing would reveal His sovereign purpose at a critical point in the narrative.

How often do we all question **"Where are you God?"** when we don't see God 'visibly' at work on our finite clock. Mordecai is a great eg. for us all, of quiet trust and humility. He didn't promote himself to make sure he was honored, nor did he doubt God's justice. He lived out the command written in the N.T. - "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that HE may exalt you at the proper time" (1Peter 5:6). JESUS gave assurance for each of us to claim: "My Father is always working and I myself am also working" (John 5:17). We please God by believing that He is a rewarder of those who wait for Him, but the timing is up to God, not us. We need to humble ourselves and leave the purposes of God with our lives and our loved ones up to His control. Our responsibility is to be humble and thankful that we know that God is at work. Then join Him in praying for what is on our heart. In what areas to you need to release your judgmental attitude towards God? Don't grow weary in prayer! (Luke 18:1)

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews: 3:1-15

Haman was elevated to be the head over *all* the king's officials. People bowed down to Haman; but Mordecai would not bow down, finally revealing his reason: he was a Jew. Haman despised Mordecai wanting revenge toward all the Jewish people.

There is an interesting reason for why Mordecai chose to not bow down to Haman. Haman's was an Amalekite, age-old enemies of the Jews. The Amalekites had attacked the Jews from the rear, when they were vulnerable after 1st arriving in Canaan from Egypt (Ex. 17:8-15). God declared war on them and King Saul (a Benjamite), Israel's 1st king, was to completely eradicate them, but he disobeyed (1Sam.15). Mordecai was also a Benjamite, and most likely was exercising his desire to honor God's command to not be aligned with the Amalekites. (*W. Wiersbe gives great detail in his excellent O.T. History commentary on Esther, p.716*).

Haman began to scheme how he would destroy all the Jews in the entire kingdom; but he needed Xerxes' permission to do so.

Then Haman said to King Xerxes, “There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king’s laws; it is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king’s administrators for the royal treasury” (3:8,9).

Haman was deceitful and exaggerated his facts to make his case to sway Xerxes. He did not tell Xerxes who the ‘*certain people dispersed throughout the empire*’ were. This would elevate Xerxes fears and suspicions. Haman made it sound like these people were causing the king trouble all over the empire, which was a lie. In fact, God had commanded the Jews through the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 29:4-7), to settle down in captivity and NOT cause trouble for their rulers. They were obeying this. Xerxes, known for making hasty decisions, was still unaware of Esther’s Jewish roots, and signed and sealed the decree authorizing the complete extermination of the Jews on a particular day – the 13th of Adar, (which God’s hand was in, giving the Jews a year to prepare). This decree was speedily taken to every one of the 127 provinces in the kingdom informing the Jews of their fate.

Mordecai appeals to Esther for help: 4:1-17

All Jews, including Mordecai, donned sackcloth and ashes as they wailed over the decree announcing their extinction. A report came to Esther concerning Mordecai’s mourning, leading her to inquire what was happening. Mordecai reported to Esther concerning Haman’s plot. Perhaps God had placed her in her high position to be used “***for such a time as this***”. She would have to intercede on behalf of the Jews to save her people.

“Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS” (4:12-14)?

Previously, Mordecai had commanded Esther to keep her nationality a secret. Now, he told her that it was time to speak up on behalf of her people. Esther responded to Mordecai with honest fear but with great courage and a heart to be used by God. She knew that it would take God's mighty work in Xerxes' heart to receive her when she went to him uninvited.

“Go gather all the Jews in Susa to fast for me. Do not eat or drink for 3 days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I PERISH, I PERISH” (Esther 4:15,16).

Fasting was always accompanied by humbling yourself and confessing sin, and praying that God would see your dependence on Him and desire for His hand, more than food. It is still accepted as the way today.

God delights in using the most 'ordinary' life for His significant purposes. Esther had been in her role as gracious queen for 8 years with no incident. Suddenly, her role to intercede became crucial. She knew she was in that role for the specific opportunity that was before her, to save her people from being annihilated by Haman's vengeance. Never underestimate the importance of your role among other people through all ages and stages of your life. The opportunity to act in faith will present itself IF you are available to be used for God's sovereign purposes. How could your current role be used to serve God's purposes if you are willing? What spiritual discipline is needed to prepare yourself and someone's heart for His work in their life?

Esther approaches Xerxes: 5:1-8

On the third day, Esther approached Xerxes and he gladly welcomed her into his presence. When he asked her to give her request, she invited the king and Haman to a dinner banquet she had prepared for that evening. The king complied and, curiously asked her again what was her request. God's prompting and Esther's intuition must have caused her to sense the timing was not right to raise the grave issue of Haman's plot against her people. She asked that Xerxes and Haman come again the next evening.

Haman's rage against Mordecai: 5:9-14

As Haman departed from the palace, he passed Mordecai who again, did not bow down, causing Haman's rage to strengthen. At

home, he began boasting to his wife and friends about how great he was in the king and queen's sight. Yet, Mordecai's refusal to bow down to honor him was eating him alive!

“But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate” (5:13).

His wife Zeresh advised him to use his authority to cruelly execute Mordecai on a 75-foot high gallows the following day. Haman instantly had the gallows constructed.

Four forces were at work against Haman that he was blind to: 1) Divine sovereignty and the power of prayer (leading to Esther's intuition to wait). 2) His false confidence in his position and why he alone was invited with the king. 3) His pride- boasting at home, building the gallows. Pride is God's #1 hatred, Proverbs 6:16-19. 4) Malice: deep-seated hatred that brings delight if our enemy suffers (Wiersbe, O.T. History p.728-732). Things are not always as they appear! “We walk by faith not by sight” (2Cor.5:7).

Mordecai honored by the king: 6:1-14

God's sovereign hand moves to intervene. That same night, king Xerxes couldn't sleep. He ordered his servants to bring the records of his reign and to read to him. They chose to read how Mordecai had saved the king from an assassination plot (2:19-23).

The king realized that Mordecai had never been rewarded. Early in the morning, Haman went to ask the king permission to *execute Mordecai*. First, Xerxes asked Haman an unexpected question:

“What should be done for the man the king delights to honor” (6:6)?

Proudly, Haman supposed that the king was *intending to honor himself!* He replied, the man to be honored should be led through the city *riding the king's horse, wearing the king's robe, with the king's crest on his head.* The king's next command must have rocked Haman to his core:

“Go at once...Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended” (6:10).

Humiliated, Haman did as the king commanded, leading Mordecai on horseback through the city streets. Afterwards . . .

“Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, ‘Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!’ While they were still talking with him, the king’s eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared” (6:12-14).

The plot revealed, Haman executed: 7:1-10

At the 2nd banquet, Xerxes again asked Esther her request of him. She then revealed Haman’s plot to destroy her and her people:

“If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated” (7:3,4).

She pointed to Haman as the instigator of the plot to annihilate the Jews. The king, enraged at Haman’s deceptive plot, walked out of the meeting to compose himself. Meanwhile, Haman fell before Esther to plead for his life.

“Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, ‘Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?’” (7:8).

Haman was speechless. The king commanded that Haman be immediately executed on the same gallows built for Mordecai. He gave Haman’s entire estate to Esther, and his signet ring to Mordecai (8:2), raising Mordecai to Haman’s position (10:3)!

How quickly events can be turned around by God’s sovereign timing. Wise and humble Mordecai was given all the honor and authority of Haman. But his character was able to handle it. Mordecai cared for the well-being of the people, rather than himself. God knows when we are to be noticed, or given a raise, or recognition. It also may not happen till heaven as with many faithful believers. Do you feel you deserve some recognition that you aren’t receiving? Entrust that desire to God, and remember that He is faithful to reward.

The King’s second edict: 8:1-17

The first royal edict, sealed with the king’s signet ring, to destroy

the Jews could not be revoked. Esther pleaded with Xerxes to issue a 2nd royal edict which he was eager to do, granting the Jews the right to arm and defend themselves on the day when their enemies planned to attack and kill them (the 13th of Adar). They had 9 more months to prepare. Mordecai composed the new edict, sealed and sent it quickly to all 127 provinces. There was jubilation among God's people throughout the kingdom.

“For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. In every province and in every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them” (8:16,17).

The Feast of Purim established: 9:1-32

As a result of the 2nd decree of Xerxes, the Jews in every province successfully defended themselves against their enemies. This led to the establishment of a new, annual Jewish feast called “Purim” (based on the word “Pur” which means, “to cast the lot”). Haman had “cast the lot” to determine the day for the extermination of the Jews; but God had “reversed the lot” so that the day became one of deliverance for the Jews.

“Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor” (9:20-22).

Even to this day, the Feast of Purim is celebrated as a national holiday in Israel.

The exaltation of Mordecai: 10:1-3

The story concludes with the exaltation of Mordecai to 2nd in command in the kingdom of Xerxes.

“Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews” (10:3).

Summary: The book of Esther shows the interplay between God's sovereign activity and human decisions (good and bad).

1. God's Sovereign Activity on Display

"There is no attribute of God more comforting to His children than the doctrine of divine sovereignty." Charles H. Spurgeon (Wiersbe, p.172)

- God is active and in control when He seems to be uninvolved.
- God is faithful, even when it seems that His enemies have usurped His will.
- God is our protector, even when it feels like someone or something is overwhelming us.
- God loves us, even when it seems as if the whole world hates us.
- God delights in humbling the foolish and the proud, and exalting the humble and the wise
- God can cause His people to be noticed and given a place of authority.
- God can direct the thoughts of someone's heart to accomplish His plan.
- God shows His love and involvement even when He disciplines.
- God delights when we fast and pray in dependence on Him.

2. People's Wisdom on Display

- Caring for, or raising the orphans and the vulnerable (Mordecai).
- Obeying our parents when they give us wise advice (Esther).
- Trusting God's protection in difficult circumstances (Esther's year in the harem; Mordecai staying attuned).
- Doing our work well without needing to be honored (Mordecai).
- Having foresight to help another person see their God-given opportunity (Mordecai-Esther was queen for such a time as this).
- Having a 'salting influence' on someone (Esther with Xerxes).
- Having courage to stand for what is right (Vashti, Mordecai).

People's Wisdom cont...

-Having courage to move through fear to faith for the sake of a higher purpose (Esther going before Xerxes without invitation).

-Knowing the power of fasting and prayer and willingly doing it (Esther and all the Jews).

-Knowing the boundary set by God when defending ourselves against an enemy (the Jews didn't initiate fighting, only defended themselves, and they did not plunder those who died).

-Displaying a character that pleases God and influences others-genuine piety, faith, courage, patriotism, compassion, maturity and natural charm (Esther) (*Jensen: Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, p.81*).

-Setting aside days to "remember" and celebrate God's work in our lives (the Jews-Purim).

Discussion Questions

1. Xerxes, Vashti, Mordecai, Esther and Haman are the main people in the account. Who do you identify with and why?
2. What sovereign ways of God encourage you right now in your life-circumstances, and why?
3. What examples from the people of wisdom listed above challenge you? Why?
4. Can you see your God-given purpose in your current role or stage of life? What is it?