



# The Bible Challenge

A daily guide to reading the Bible in a year

## Esther

Chapters 1-10

### Great Reversals by the Providence of God

The Book of Esther is unique in the Old Testament in that it makes no direct mention of God. For this reason, many through the years have rejected its place in the Hebrew Scriptures. However, the book itself is entirely about God and his providential rescue of the Jewish people through from total annihilation.

The book tells the story of how a Jewish princess, Esther, and her cousin, Mordicai, rose from a place of danger to a position of power and prominence over all of the Persian Empire during the reign of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, 486-464 BC).

The book also explains the origin of the Jewish festival Purim.

### Structure<sup>32</sup>

The Book of Esther		1-10
Mortal Danger	Prologue	1
	The King's 1st Decree	2, 3
	The Clash between Haman and Mordecai	4, 5
Crisis	Hinge: "On that night the king could not sleep"	6:1
Salvation	Mordecai's triumph over Haman	6, 7
	The King's Second Decree	8, 9
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The narrative structure of Esther centers on two decrees of King Ahasuerus and the reversal of positions between two royal advisors, Haman and Mordecai. The reversal is made possible because of the faithfulness of Queen Esther and the providence of God. The movement in the book is from the Jewish people under threat of total destruction to a place of triumph over their enemies.

<sup>32</sup> Baldwin, Joyce, *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary* (Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 1984) p. 30



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## Prologue (Chapter 1)

The book of Esther opens with a great feast by the Persian King Ashasuerus. At the feast, he calls his beautiful wife, Vashti, to himself to be on display before all his guests—a command which she refuses.

The king and his advisors see her disobedience as an act which could lead to the disloyalty and disobedience to husbands all over the Persian Empire. By decree her avoidance of the King's court is made permanent as she is dethroned from the position of Queen.

Vashti's disobedience sets the stage for Esther's obedience.

## The King's First Decree (Chapters 2, 3)

Chapter 2 opens with a Persian beauty contest. Because of Esther's "great beauty" she is uniquely qualified to be in a position to make an appeal for the position of Queen. At the command of her cousin, she makes herself available for display.

*And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. -Esther 2:16-17*

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While the name of God is not mentioned, his hand is seen in all of the unfolding events. Esther's obedience to Mordecai and the King is to be contrasted with Vashti's disobedience. God uses her for his purposes. Likewise, Mordecai's integrity toward the King will also become an occasion for Divine Providence. In 2:21-23, Mordecai overhears a plot of sedition against the King. His integrity and service to the King will be used for God's glory and is to be contrasted with the vain self-service of the royal advisor Haman.

In chapter 3, Haman grows to despise Mordecai and seek his death because of Mordecai's refusal to pay homage to him (presumably out

*You shall have no other  
God's before me.  
- Deut. 5:7*



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*For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"*  
<sup>15</sup> Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai,  
<sup>16</sup> "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." Esther  
4:14-16

of Jewish obedience to God alone). Out of spite and hatred for Mordecai, Haman convinces the King to set a date certain for the total annihilation of all Jews in the Persian empire. This decree if carried out to the letter would have been the end of the promise to Abraham and his descendants. (see Gen 12)

## The Clash between Haman and Mordecai (4 & 5)

As the hatred toward Mordecai rises, so too does the prominence and stature of Queen Esther.

Mordecai and Esther devise a plan by which the King's decree can be nullified. The irony is that the decree, unbeknownst to king, would include the death of his beloved and beautiful wife, Queen Esther. (4:13) The law of courtly etiquette did not allow a person to gain a hearing with the King without first being summoned by him. For Esther to make an appeal to him on behalf of her people she would put her own life at great risk of the King's mercy.

In a bold act, Esther enters the king's court without summons and is extended the gold scepter of the King's royal favor. In contrast to her predecessor Vashti's rebellion against the King's summons, Esther greatly pleases him with initiative without summons. He offers her any request. Her request is an invitation for the King and his advisor Haman to attend a feast prepared by Esther.

Haman is delighted to be invited to such a high honor. Yet, even as he revels in the Queen's invitation, he builds a massive gallows from which to hang his enemy Mordecai.

## Hinge: "On that night the king could not sleep" (6:1)

The turning point in the narrative occurs when the King has a sleepless night. He orders that the chronicles of his kingdom be read, and in them he hears of the loyal acts of Mordecai in thwarting the plot of sedition against the King's life.

King Ahashuerus in that moment purposes to exalt Mordecai to high honor for his loyalty and action. Ironically, the vain Haman mistakenly believes the king was purposing to honor him: Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?" (6:6)



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## Mordecai's triumph over Haman (6 & 7)

As Mordecai rises, Haman falls. Haman's own wife recognizes the wall of fate (divine providence) which Haman is up against:

*Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him." Esther 6:13*

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At the banquet, Esther reveals to the King Haman's plot to annihilate her and her people. Haman is indeed exalted, but it is to height of his own 50 cubit high gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai (7:10)!

## The King's Second Decree (8 & 9)

The story of Esther is one of great reversals at the hand of God. Chapters 8 and 9 reverse the negatives of chapters 4 and 5.

First, Haman's power and authority are given to his enemy Mordecai (8:1-2). The real dilemma is in how to reverse the first decree. In Persian law, a king's decree is irrevocable. It was not simply a matter of cancelling the order to annihilate the Jews for it had been sealed with the royal signet ring.

The solution was a second decree given under the seal of the signet ring. This decree gave the Jewish people the right to defend themselves against their enemies and annihilate any who would stand against them.

As the decree was given, the entire empire was put in fear of the Jewish people (8:17). The Jews carried out this edict with ferocity. On the very day where the Jews were themselves to be destroyed, they completely destroyed their every enemy. (9:1-19) The feast of Purim is established as a perpetual remembrance of this providential reversal and deliverance. (9:20-32) And, Mordecai is honored as great for seeking the welfare of his people. (10:3)

And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

Esther 8:17