

Rising From the Ruins

Conspiracy

Esther Chapters 1-3

Leaders Guide

Biblical historians believe that Esther takes place between the time that the temple was completed and Ezra arrives in Jerusalem. Here is an approximate timeline to help you get oriented:

586 BC	Fall of Judah - temple destroyed by Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar.
538 BC	End of exile decree from Cyrus the Great, king of Persia. First return of people to Judah under leadership of Zerubbabel.
516 BC	Temple completed. Darius I is king.
479 BC	Esther is queen of Persia to King Xerxes (aka Ahasuerus).
458 BC	Ezra arrives in Jerusalem. Artaxerxes I is king of the Persian empire. Second return of people from exile.
445 BC	Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem. Artaxerxes I is king of Persia. Third return of people from exile.

Political Intrigue

Xerxes had only been king for three years (according to the Greek historian, Herodotus). His father, Darius, had been defeated by the Athenians a few years earlier and Xerxes was trying to gain support for a military campaign against Greece. He needed to convince others that he was wealthy and powerful enough to be successful in this campaign. He needed their support to defeat the powerful Greek forces. So he threw a six-month party for nobles, officials, military leaders and princes from all 127 provinces under his rule. When that party was over, he then gave a week long banquet for the local people of Susa, to thank them for helping to make his efforts a success and to start planning the military campaign. This banquet was held in the garden of the king's palace showing off the spectacular beauty and incredible wealth he and his ancestors had accumulated.

Read Esther Chapter 1.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- What was Queen Vashti doing during the banquet that Xerxes was giving?
- What did Xerxes demand of Vashti and how did she reply?
- What did Xerxes do after her rejection? What was the suggestion of his advisors?
- How does this set the stage for Esther becoming queen later?

Level B

- Describe the drama involving Queen Vashti. What reasons might she have had for refusing his request? How would you describe her actions?
- Whom did Xerxes consult and what was their advice? Why was their reaction so extreme? Should political legislation be influenced by personal issues? Why or why not?
- Where do you see God's hand at work in this situation? Can you think of a time when God worked behind the scenes in your life? Share.

Level C

- Was Vashti's reaction one of rejection, rebellion, courage, or foolishness? Explain.
- How did a marital spat turn into a political issue and an empire-wide edict? Was this justified or overkill? What is the problem with making personal issues into political mandates?
- God works behind the scenes to set the stage for the future. Explain how this incident is preparing the stage for Esther. Think of an example from modern history that demonstrates God working behind the scenes to further His plans for the future. Share with your group.

Orphan to Queen

Xerxes went off to his military campaign with a huge army. But Xerxes was defeated at the naval Battle of Salamis because the Spartans, led by King Leonidas, killed so many of his troops at Thermopylae (480 BC) that his troops were unable to reach him in time. When he returned, beaten and depressed, he had no queen to comfort him. Something had to be done.

Esther had two names. Esther is a Persian name that means "star." Hadassah is a Hebrew

name that means “myrtle tree.” The myrtle is a fragrant and pretty tree that survives in less than ideal conditions. Think about the significance of her names as you study her story. Think of the significance of having two names because she lives in two worlds.

Note to leader: Esther’s Hebrew name, Hadassah, means myrtle or myrtle tree. This is a tree or shrub that grows in Israel primarily in the northern region of Galilee and the mountains of Carmel. It is beautiful with glossy leaves and fragrant berries often used for perfume and for decoration during special festivals, especially Sukkot. It is known to survive in very harsh conditions and to provide shelter where other trees cannot flourish. Today Hadassah is the name of a Zionist women’s philanthropic organization that honors Esther’s place in their history.

Read Esther 2:1-18.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- How was the new queen to be found? What process did candidates go through to prepare them? Who was in charge?
- What was Esther’s background? How would you describe her character?
- What signs of God’s hand do you see in the choosing and elevation of Esther to Queen of Persia?

Level B

- There was more to Esther than just beauty. Why was Haggai drawn to her and why was his support important?
- Esther was obedient to Mordecai, to Haggai, and to the laws of Persia. She basically was a sex slave with very few options. How is her obedience an example for how a faithful Christian should act (Ephesians 6:5-8)?
- Have you ever been caught in a circumstance where disobedience was dangerous? Share with your group and discuss how Esther’s behavior could have helped you with your situation.

Level C

- What character traits of Esther do you see as critical for her success in becoming queen? Which of these traits do you see as most valuable to Christians?
- How do you see God’s intervention in Esther’s story?
- There are many people in this country and around the world that are trapped in situations where they have few choices. How would you use the story of Esther to

inspire them? What advice would you give to someone who was conscripted into a situation where they would not have free will?

Two Men

Mordecai was the cousin of Esther and the person who took her in when she was orphaned. He was like a father to her. The verses say that he sat at the king's gate in the city of Susa. This probably meant he was some sort of civil servant. The king's gate was where the city's commerce and legal activities took place. Civil servants issued documents for businessmen and recorded legal disputes. This was where businessmen received permission to sell their goods or conduct other business in the city. This was where legal disputes were argued, judged, and resolved. Sometimes the king would come to the king's gate for an audience or to hold a royal court. This was a location where there would be lots of people, lots of conversation, lots of negotiating, lots of gossip, and lots of intrigue. Sometimes being an ordinary, invisible, nobody can be an advantage.

Note to leader: The name Mordecai means follower of Marduk (one of the Babylonian gods). It is Mordecai's Persian name. But it is interesting to note that in Hebrew mar means bitter and dak means crushed or oppressed. Note also that his family is descended from King Saul.

Haman was the son of an Agagite. Agag was a king of Amalek (1 Samuel 15:20). The Amalekites attacked the Hebrews as they were escaping from Egypt (Ex 17:8-16). Later they would war with King Saul whom God told to destroy Agag. Saul disobeyed and let Agag live. Thus it was said that the Lord would be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation. Now someone who hated Jews was elevated to a position of leadership over the people of Persia, many of whom were Hebrew exiles.

Note to leader: Obedience to the 2nd commandment (Ex 20:4) is not why Mordecai refused to bow down. Jews in the past have bowed to kings and others in leadership positions. This had to do with the long-standing hatred between the Jews and the Amalekites.

Read Esther 2:19-3:6

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- What does Mordecai's adoption of Esther tell us about the kind of man he was?
- What did Mordecai overhear and what did he do about it?
- How did Mordecai react to Haman's promotion?
- Compare and contrast the character of the two men.

Level B

- How did Mordecai's position place him in the right place at the right time with the right connections?
- Have you ever been an "invisible" person and overheard things that were significant? How did you use that information?
- How would you characterize Mordecai's behavior toward Haman? Haman's behavior toward Mordecai? What does their behavior tell us about these two men?
- Have you ever been in a situation where someone you found distasteful was promoted and you were expected to honor and respect them anyway? How did that feel? How did you act toward them?

Level C

- How did Mordecai's position work to his advantage? Kings usually rewarded people who saved their lives. Why do you think Mordecai wasn't rewarded?
- Are there people within your business, social circle, or church that are "invisible" to the people in leadership? How does/might the leadership tap into the contribution that their knowledge and insight could provide?
- How did Haman go from a lack of respect by one person to the genocide of an entire ethnic group? Do all powerful people react so emotionally when they feel disrespected? Is it justified? What does it say about the source of their power?
- Would you describe Esther 3:4 as an example of bias by the royal officials? Do you think this was reserved for just the Jews or for all the "foreign" exiles? How does that connect to today's world?

The Genocide Plan

Haman was so determined to exterminate the Jews that he chose the date before he talked to the king. He did this by having the officials cast lots. **Pur** is an Assyrian word that means "lot" in English. In Hebrew the word for lot is **goral**. The root for **goral** is stone or pebble and evolved into the double meaning—portion or destiny. Biblical

archeologist, William Hallo, explains that *pur* was an Assyrian dice game played with clay cubes that had words written on each side. The cubes were dropped or thrown to reveal the god's will. In Assyria, *pur* was used to make all sorts of decisions including choosing a calendar time for events. Hallo speculates that this practice spread during the Assyrian empire to other cultures as well, thus becoming a common practice in many regions including Persia. In this instance Haman drew a group of officials together who each tossed their cube and the result of all the cubes determined the date for the genocide. As it turned out, this was eleven months later in March/April around the time of the Jewish passover.

Read Esther 3:7-15.

Answer the following questions:

Level A

- How did Haman convince King Xerxes to go along with his plan?
- What did the edict say? Who was to carry out the edict?
- How do the actions of governments give permission to the people to do things they might not ordinarily do on their own? Can you connect this scenario to the attitude in Germany during WWII? Explain.

Level B

- Notice that Haman didn't name the Jews specifically but used a nebulous term when talking to the king. Why might he have done that? What was his rationale to the king for destroying them?
- Xerxes capitulated fairly easily. Why? What does this say about Xerxes, Haman, and their relationship? How have you witnessed the manipulation of people in power?
- Notice that the people of Susa were "bewildered." Have you ever been issued instructions to do something with which you were uncomfortable? How did you handle it?

Level C

- What reasons did Haman give to Xerxes for destroying the Jews? Where do you see a similar attitude or justification for murder in our world today?
- What preparations were necessary in order to disseminate the edict to the provinces? In our electronic age, these preparations would only take a short time. How does that impact changes in laws and regulations today? What are the positive and negative aspects of speedy communications?

- The government was basically giving the public free reign to destroy their Jewish neighbors and take their stuff. Why would the Persian people be willing to carry out the edict? Why would some people be confused or bewildered by the order? Give an example from history of another government giving permission to the public to destroy a group of people. What could be the underlying motivations for such an order?

