

ESTHER

for such a time
as this

Study Guide
Term 3 2022



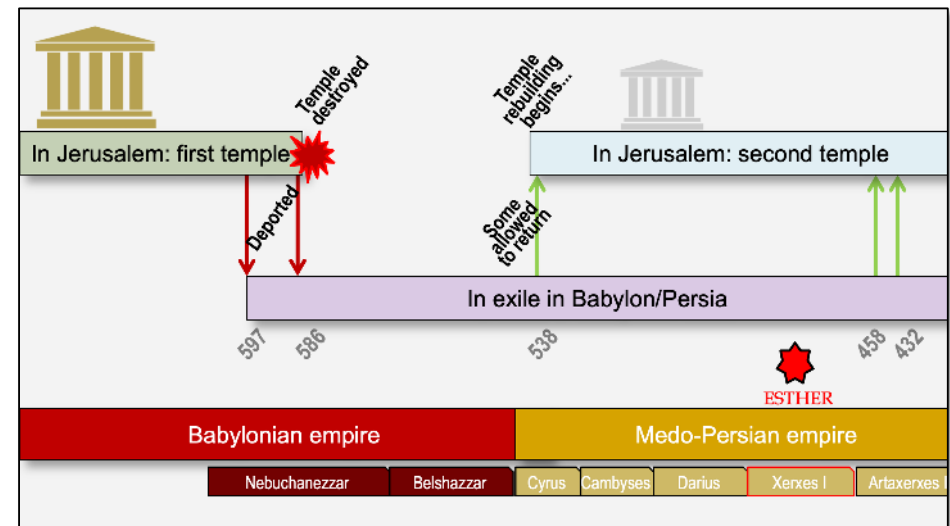
Study 1: Esther 1-2

Around 1000BC, ancient Israel had enjoyed a Golden Age. They lived in the promised land, were numerous, enjoyed peace and prosperity, and were a light to the world. The nation was united under kings Saul, David and Solomon. It seemed the promises to Abraham were basically complete.

But because Solomon failed to worship the Lord exclusively, after his death the kingdom was torn in two. The faithlessness of the northern kingdom (Israel) led to them being conquered and dispersed by Assyria in 722BC. The southern kingdom (Judah) fared little better and were conquered by the Babylonians. In 586BC Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and the people taken into exile around Babylonia (See 2 Chronicles 36:15-21). It was during the exile that the Lord's people became known as Jews, because they came from the province of Judea.

Later, the Babylonians were conquered by the Medo-Persian empire. In 538BC, the Persian king Cyrus began to allow some Jews to return to Judea and rebuild the city and the temple (See 2 Chronicles 36.22-23). But many remained scattered around the empire.

King Cyrus was succeeded by Cambyses, Darius, then Xerxes (486–465 BC). The book of Esther is set during Xerxes' rule, in the Persian capital city Susa.



The book of Esther does not give us any *explicit* teaching about God. God does not speak, and in fact he is never mentioned by name! But since the book records the salvation of God’s covenant people, it invites us to look for his sovereign hand at work behind the scenes. And since this book is included in the scriptures, we are invited to interpret these events in light of what we know about God from the rest of the Bible – just as those involved at the time did. As the book opens, we get a picture of the mighty Persian empire.



Read Esther 1:1-9

1. Which of the details given here make you realise the empire’s
 - a. Size
 - b. Power
 - c. Prosperity

2. Do you feel attracted to being part of this empire? Why?

Read Esther 1:10-22

3. How does this section change your impression of the empire’s
 - a. Power
 - b. Attractiveness

Read Esther 2:1-4

4. This scheme might make us think of modern beauty contests or shows like The Bachelor. But can you spot an important difference?

Read Esther 2:5-7

Here we meet two important characters in the book. Write down all the key facts we are given about them.

Mordecai	
Esther	

5. The writer wants to tell us Mordecai's family history. Look at 1 Samuel 9:1-2. Why is *Kish* a significant ancestor for Mordecai to have?

Read Esther 2:8-18

6. How exactly – on what grounds - does Esther become queen?
7. What does Esther do with her Jewish identity? What circumstances would lead to this?

Read Esther 2:19-23

During the queen-contest, Mordecai has been employed as a civil servant, "sitting at the king's gate" (v19). He would have had no direct access to the king.

8. How does the king find out about the assassination plot?
9. Rewarding loyalty and punishing disloyalty was considered an important task for kings who wanted to remain in power. In this section, what reward does Mordecai get for his loyalty to Xerxes?

Consider chapters 1-2 overall

10. How does your experience of the world we live in today echo what we have seen here of the Persian empire? What, or who, seems powerful to you? As a Christian, what makes you feel weak, marginalised or fearful like Esther and Mordecai?
11. The Persian regime was impressive and intimidating. But it was also anxious and insecure. How do these chapters expose the empire's weakness? For God's people, how is it helpful to recognise this?
12. What are the main things we learn here about living as God's people amidst a powerful empire?
13. Does anything in this study relate to your growth area for 2022?



Notes & Prayer Points

Study 2: Esther 3-4

1. Recall from last week: Who saved the king's life at the end of chapter 2?

Read Esther 3:1-6

2. We meet here another key character in the book. Write down the key facts we are told about him here.

Haman	
--------------	--

*Like Mordecai earlier, the information we're given about Haman's family background is significant. He was an **Agagite**. Agag had been king of the Amalakites at the time Saul (Mordecai's relative) was king of Israel. The Amalakites had been long-time enemies of Israel, having first attacked them just after the escape from Egypt (Exodus 17:8-16, Deut 25:17-19). Saul's conduct in battle against king Agag had led to his downfall as king of Israel (1 Sam 15). So there was a longstanding enmity between these two nations.*

3. How does the back-story help us understand Mordecai and Haman's actions in this passage?

Read Esther 3:7-15

Verse 7 suggests that Haman visited a professional diviner to ask the gods about the most favourable time for his attack on the Jews. A "pur" (plural "purim" – see 9:26) was a clay cube much the same as a modern dice. The same kind of device was sometimes used by Israel when "casting lots" to seek the Lord's will (eg Josh 18:6). "The lot is cast in the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Proverbs 16:33).

4. Thanks to the casting of the *pur*, what time gap will there be between Haman making his plan and executing it? What difference could this make to how things turn out?

5. How does Haman describe the Jews to the king? Is it an accurate description? Consider Esther and Mordecai's actions so far.

6. Look at the details of the edict in verses 13-14. If it gets put into action, what will be left of God's people and God's promises?

7. In what ways is the situation in this chapter representative of the circumstances of God's people throughout history, and today?

Read Esther 4:1-3

Tearing clothes and wearing sackcloth and ashes was a common expression of grief. But it's notable that there was a passage in the prophet Joel which combined the exact same three Hebrew words for "fasting, weeping and wailing".

8. Read Joel 2:12-14 and consider:

- a. For those who heard Joel's message, what would the fasting, weeping and wailing express? What outcome was hoped for?

b. For readers of Esther who recognise this connection to Joel, what extra meaning can be seen in Mordecai's action?

Read Esther 4:4-11

9. Look at the end of verse 8. Mordecai had previously told Esther to keep her Jewish identity under wraps (2:10,20). What is he telling her to do now?

10. Why does Esther feel unable to help? Why might she be *unwilling* to help?

Read Esther 4:12-17

11. In verse 14 Mordecai is confident to say "relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place". How does this fit with his fasting, weeping and wailing?

12. Mordecai strangely warns Esther "if you keep silent... you and your father's family will perish". What do you think he means? What fundamental identity choice is Esther facing here?

13. When have you faced this kind of choice, in little or big ways?

14. Consider Mordecai's challenge at the end of verse 14, and Esther's reply that follows. What do you think went through her head before replying? Write a sentence or two that she might have thought to herself.

15. Consider Esther's reply to Mordecai.

a. How does this compare with her actions throughout the book so far?

b. How are Esther's actions an illustration of faith?

16. How is Queen Esther similar, and different, to King Jesus? How does this story help us appreciate Jesus all the more?

17. Does anything raised in this study relate to your growth area for 2022?



Notes & Prayer Points

Study 3: Esther 5:1 – 8:2

1. Recall from last week: What risky task has Esther agreed to undertake?

Read Esther 5:1-8

2. The King is in a good mood, allows Esther to enter his presence alive, and invites her to make a request (although “half the kingdom” was just conventional regal exaggeration). What does she ask the king for in this passage? Does it surprise you?

Read Esther 5:9-14

3. Which verses describe Haman’s emotions? What does he feel?
4. What insights into Haman’s heart do we get here?

Read Esther 6:1-14

5. What key event changes the whole direction of the story? What caused this event?
6. Which verse describes Haman’s emotions? What does he feel?

7. Look at the new advice from Haman’s wife and advisers in verse 13b.
 - a. How has it changed from what they said earlier in 5:14?
 - b. How does this perspective compare with what Mordecai said in 4:14?

Read Esther 7:1 – 8:2

8. Things don’t turn out as Haman planned. In the boxes below, draw lines to connect the characters to the outcomes.

Haman’s Plan		The actual result	
Haman	Glory & Honour	Haman	Glory & Honour
Mordecai	Humiliating death	Mordecai	Humiliating death

Consider all three chapters

9. How do we see the hidden hand of God at work in this story? How would you summarise what God has brought about?
10. How can this encourage us to keep on trusting God when he seems absent?
11. How does this story foreshadow Jesus’ death and resurrection?
12. How does the heart of Haman show you something of the darkness in your own heart? In what ways are you something like Haman? How does this story encourage you to repent of those tendencies?
13. Does anything in this study relate to your growth area for 2022?



Notes & Prayer Points

Study 4: Esther 8:3 – 10:3

1. Recall from last week: What great reversal of fortunes occurred with Haman and Mordecai?

Although Haman is no longer in the picture, a problem remains. The royal decree he authored (3:13) is still in force throughout the empire. Nothing has yet been done to prevent violence erupting in the twelfth month.

Read Esther 8:3-14

2. Under this new decree, what exactly are the Jews entitled to do?
3. How does it compare to Haman's decree back in 3:13-15?
4. Find the verses that mention dates.
 - a. How long is there between the day the decree was issued and the day the Jews are allowed to avenge themselves?
 - b. What could happen in this gap?
 - c. Can you see any similarity between this gap and the age we live in today?

Read Esther 8:15-17

5. "Many people of other nationalities became Jews" (verse 17).
 - d. How does this compare with the atmosphere back in chapter 2?
 - e. How does this relate to the promises to Abraham in Genesis 12:3?

Read Esther 9:1-16

6. What's your instinctive feeling about the events recorded here?
7. Who exactly got attacked?
8. What aspect of the king's decree did the Jews not take advantage of? Can you think of a reason why?
9. Given this was a defensive action, what does Esther's request for a second day (verse 13) reveal about the situation of the Jews in Susa?

"Holy war" in the Old Testament is something we find it hard to wrap our heads around as we live our peaceful suburban lives today. But ever since the beginning of the nation of ancient Israel, they had faced violent threats to their existence. As God had led them into the land he'd promised, he commanded his people to fight against enemies who opposed the fulfillment of God's promises to his people. It was never a free-for-all: once settled in the land, Israel were not to engage in aggressive fights for more territory, but only to defend against foreign invaders. The battle belonged to the Lord, and the people of Israel were instruments of his judgement, so it was important that they did not themselves benefit by taking plunder (Joshua 6:18-19). Failure to observe this had been the downfall of king Saul (1 Samuel 15).

Christopher Ash writes: "Before we get too squeamish about this, we need to remember the political realities of the time. Imprisonment was a rare and expensive option; it was simply not possible to imprison the numbers recorded [here]. It is clear that Haman is far from being the only enemy of the Jews. There is a large group who are determined to kill them; they have an implacable hostility to the covenant people. These enemies have had nine months in which to change their minds. Now it is either their life or ours. If the enemies live, the Jews die. The only way the Jews can live is if their enemies died. These killings may be rough justice, but they are justice."

Read Esther 9:17 – 10:3

10. How did God's people respond to victory?
11. Mordecai here institutes the annual festival of *Purim*, still celebrated by Jewish people today. What is the purpose of the festival?
12. The festival is named after the dice, or lot, that Haman cast in 3:7. The Jews believed "The lot is cast in the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Proverbs 16:33). How does the name of the festival give credit to God?
13. What Christian festival(s) help us to keep on remembering and celebrating the greatest act of salvation? How are they similar and different to Purim? How can we make sure we get the most encouragement from them?

Consider the book as a whole

14. What is one main idea you will remember from studying the book of Esther?
15. Is there something from this study, or the series overall, that relates to your growth area for 2022?



Notes & Prayer Points
