

Esther-by Tommy Lee

Chapter 1

What an impressive opening scene! Archaeological excavations have uncovered many of the places we'll be visiting in this book, including the throne room, the harem (the part of the palace reserved as the residence for women), and "*the court of the garden of the king's palace*" (mentioned in v.5). We also have some of the lavishly ornate, artistically designed golden goblets from this period, probably much like those used in v.7. According to v.3, this story begins in 483 BC, the third year of Ahasuerus' reign (Ahasuerus is the Hebrew transliteration of his Persian name Khshayarsha; history knows him better by the Greek transliteration of his name, Xerxes). By year three all opposition to his reign has ended, the empire is consolidated, and he's basically ruling the world. And yet... the queen's refusal to appear at his request now has him feeling foolish in front of the visiting dignitaries and high officials. What should he do? Memucan speaks for the seven advisors: if the queen's behavior badly influences other noble wives, the universe will explode. Banish her & find a new queen.

Chapter 2

The indignities of the pagan harem system were quite dehumanizing. Most of the beautiful women in this chapter would spend exactly one night with the king, and then live out the rest of their days as second-class wives ("*concubines*," see v.14), neglected and useless, idle and devalued. Of the many girls brought to the capital, only one is mentioned by name—Esther. She's introduced as a Jewish orphan, adopted by her older cousin, Mordecai. But Esther had now grown to be a "*young woman [who] had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at*" (v.7). This fact is not a careless or random throw-away line on the part of a creepy author; rather, it's a key factor in God's purposes, as they unfold in this chapter and, indeed, in the rest of the book. Esther's attractive features are presented as a good gift of God, who has raised her up and prepared her "*for such a time as this*"—as we will learn in chapter 4. Note in v.11 how Mordecai checked on his young cousin (adopted daughter) every day. And note in vs.10 & 20 that Esther honored and respected him. Quite unlike the household we met in chapter 1.

Chapter 3

Ever since God's first announcement that a Savior would be sent to this world (in Genesis 3.15), there was a great enemy seeking to destroy that promise. This plot of Haman's, "*to destroy all the Jews*" (v.6), is surely one of Satan's great masterpieces in history. After all, if the Jews were really destroyed, the Savior could not be born of the Jews—as the promise later specified he would be. And when we see what happens to Haman later, we'll note that it's a prefiguring of what God said would eventually happen to Satan (again, in Genesis 3.15). That's the big picture of what's going on here. The more immediate picture is this: Mordecai should have bowed to Haman, as the king commanded. Faithful Jews bow down to show honor to those in authority all the time in the Bible (see, for example, Genesis 23:7 & 12); there's nothing in faithful Judaism that would have prevented this. In fact, God specifically told the Jews of this time to live peaceably in the land of their exile (see Jeremiah 29.7). But, like we often do, Mordecai acts in foolish pride. A cunning enemy has now made the most of that opportunity.

Chapter 4

In the last chapter Haman led the king to think that this was some obscure group of radicals, intent on breaking Persian law, that would be "*destroyed, killed, and annihilated*" (3.13) through his edict. But no, it's the Jewish people who are (seemingly) on the brink of extinction, as we enter chapter 4. Mordecai, perhaps realizing that it's his own sin that has jeopardized the entire Jewish race, is in great grief (4.1). He asks Queen Esther to intercede—to approach the king on behalf of the Jewish people, asking for mercy. And Esther, though she knows it may cost her life, is willing to do so. Here we see a shadow

of the gospel: Jesus Christ is the Greater Esther, interceding for his people, knowing *for certain* that it will cost him his life. Even though God is never mentioned by name in this book, look at verses 14 & 16. Mordecai knows that God can deliver his people without Esther. And Esther knows that God hears and answers true prayer. "*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*" Hebrews 11.1

Chapter 5

In today's chapter, the person for whom the book is named takes action. She knows the Jewish community has been fasting and praying for her for three days (4.16; 5.1), so she stands with strong faith, confident resolve, a well-thought-out plan, and queenly poise before the king. However, she's not in any hurry. She has a bold request to make of the king; but first, let her give two feasts for the king... *to which she also dares to invite the villain, Haman, "the enemy of the Jews"* (3.10). The latter half of today's chapter, while we wait for the second feast, reveals more of the man Haman to us. He is completely drunk on himself. He loves boasting of his honor, his fame, his wealth, his splendor, his virility, his exalted status, his overall importance to humanity, etc., etc., etc.; he's very impressed with himself. And yet, like *The Rolling Stones*, he can't get no satisfaction. There's this one man, you see... and Haman is "terribly vexed." But by the last verse, Haman is pleased again. His closest friends and family have persuaded him to build a gallows for that one man, 75 feet high.

Chapter 6

For three days the Jews had been fasting and praying, calling out to God, begging him to deliver them from this great enemy, Haman, and from the day of Jewish slaughter that he had designed. But how would God save his doomed people? Ok, follow this well... the king cannot sleep. He asks that the chronicles of his kingdom be read to him. He hears the record of Mordecai's previous actions that exposed an old assassination attempt (from the end of chapter 2). The king discovers that nothing was ever done to reward Mordecai for saving the royal neck. The king wants to get advice on how to best honor Mordecai. What luck! Haman is in the court (preparing to ask the king's permission to hang Mordecai—see 5.14). So, the king asks for Haman's ideas on the best way to reward a man whom the king delights to honor; of course, Haman assumes this is all about him. And so the humiliation of Haman begins. His superstitious family and friends have lost all confidence in him. And here come the messengers, to bring him to the second feast. Is this an amazing string of coincidences? Or what?

Chapter 7

For the third time the king puts his great question to Esther (v.2). "*What is your wish?...*" The suspense is now at its peak. The days of community fasting and prayer had given Esther a wisdom from above; what may seem like unnecessary delay (to the rushed 21st century reader) has actually removed from Haman all of his advantage—*note in 6.14, he is no longer in control*—and given Esther's mysterious, long-awaited request maximum weight and shining focus. Note Esther's repetition of Haman's "*destroyed, killed, annihilated*" (of 3.13). Note how she also avoids naming Haman until the king demands to know his identity. And now we marvel at Esther's God-given foresight and wisdom in inviting Haman to the feast(s). For he is right there, in front of the king, to be justly swallowed up in the king's shock and wrath and rage. But, even better, the king actually tried to walk it off first, and take a breather, so that he might handle a volatile situation judiciously. But Haman, in his hasty panic, has at last forgotten himself, which was quite a feat. And conveniently, he just built a gallows, 75 feet high.

Chapter 8

Haman is now dead (as he wickedly intended all the Jewish people to be), but there are still some loose ends that need tying up. Note the wonderful irony of Mordecai now taking over Haman's status and

estate; is this not a striking example of the unexpected reversals of the gospel, as God's people have sung for nearly 2,000 years, in the beautiful words of the Magnificat, recorded in Luke 1.46-55? Then, through Esther's bold intercession, the king gives Mordecai permission to reverse the former edict (which he shrewdly does, in the only way an edict that may not be repealed or revoked—see 1.19, 8.8—can be reversed). Back in 3.15, after the original edict went out, the capital was thrown into confusion. Compare that with the exuberant verses of 8.15-17, after the reverse edict goes out. Proverbs 13.15: *"Good sense wins favor, but the way of the treacherous is their ruin."* And note in particular, the surprising last verse of this chapter. Many Gentiles come into the covenant that God made with Israel. Let's pray that, in similar grace, many unbelievers come into the church today.

Chapter 9

The numbers of those slain reveal just how widespread this intent to slaughter all the Jews was. Imagine what the numbers of the slain *Jews* would have been if much of the opposition had not melted away, if much of the political leadership had not rallied to the Jews' cause, and if the Jews had not been allowed to prepare themselves for self-defense. This is a good time to review 3.13. Haman still had many loyal followers, including his ten sons. But note that, unlike the policy in the Haman edict, the Jews refused to plunder their defeated foes (see the emphatic repetition of verses 10,15, & 16). Emphatic stress is also laid on the inauguration of the Feast of Purim. It was God acting through Moses who instituted the traditional feasts of Israel (Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles, etc.); now, through Mordecai, God adds another feast to the calendar. Note that *"Purim"* is a reference to Haman's superstitious casting of lots to find the "lucky" day for his plan (see 9.24). But the very name of the feast forever reminds us that luck does not rule the world. Neither does fate. The Lord God rules the world.

Chapter 10

Like Joseph & Daniel, Mordecai is another wise and faithful covenant-keeping believer who became the right-hand man of the leader of the world, exercising all of his authority in the fear of the Lord. And through this wonderful episode in history we are reminded again of how the Lord God was always keeping his Old Testament people safe, so that the promise of the Savior who would come into this world through them, might be fulfilled. In many ways, Israel was preparing the world for the Christ; if they had been *"destroyed, killed, and annihilated,"* the prophecies of the Christ would have failed. In 2 Thessalonians, Paul writes to the suffering, persecuted church that *"God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted."* That is still just as true today as it was in Esther's day and as it was in Paul's day. God's people today may still face seasons of persecution. What will we do? The book of Esther reminds us to stand firm and faithful, bearing witness and rejoicing in the *"peace"* that is spoken by the Greater Mordecai (Esther 10.3; John 14.27).

Reflecting on Esther-

Before moving on to our next book of the Bible, take some time today to reflect on what we've read in Esther. Perhaps re-visit a favorite chapter or an especially meaningful passage. Or read the beginning chapter(s) again, now that you've read the whole. Or go back to a part of the book that struck you as curious and see if it makes more sense now. Or speed-read the whole thing again, seeking to reinforce its main themes. Or... perhaps you need a catch-up day to finish Esther before we move forward?

"This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success." Joshua 1.8