

Esther



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What You Need to Know

The book of Esther is unique in that throughout the entire story, God's name is never mentioned. It's a dramatic story, full of unexpected plot twists, seemingly random coincidences, and characters who rise and fall. Yet through all the chaos, God is at work behind the scenes, advancing his Redemption Plan to rescue his people in spite of their sinful choices. As you read the book of Esther, we invite you to look for all the ways God is working both in her story and in yours.



SETTING

Susa, the capital of the Persian empire (a pagan nation)



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 597 BC, the Babylonians captured Judah. This was a consequence for the Jewish people's unfaithfulness. They had rejected God and chosen a life of idol worship instead. In 539 BC, Persia conquered Babylon, which meant they also gained control of the Jewish nation. Thankfully, King Cyrus, the Persian King, was pretty tolerant of the Jews' religious traditions, and he even allowed them to return to Jerusalem. However, a lot of Jews chose to stay in Persia anyways. This time, they willingly choose exile.

MAJOR THEMES

God's provision

Events that seem random or coincidental reveal God at work behind the scenes advancing his good purposes.

Human choices

Esther did not choose to become queen, but she made bold choices that reflected faithfulness and obedience.

The tension

of the “not yet”
At the end of this story, God's people will celebrate a victory, yet they will still be in captivity.



MAIN CHARACTERS

Esther

a young Jewish orphan girl who unexpectedly becomes queen

Xerxes

the king; one of the most powerful men on earth at the time

Mordecai

Esther's cousin; a man of influence and advocate of the Jews

Haman

one of the king's officials; he hates the Jews and is hungry for power

The book of Esther may never mention the name of God, but God's fingerprint is clearly seen throughout every chapter. God's commitment to redeeming his people is clearly contrasted with the evil that exists in the world. Esther and Mordecai's story also plays a crucial role in the overarching narrative of the Bible. Not only does it tell us a story of how the Jewish people continued to live in spite of persecution, it also highlights the importance of knowing Biblical history.

OVERVIEW

Grave Danger

Great Deliverance

Ch. 1–2

Vashti's downfall,
Esther's exaltation

*Feast of
Xerxes*

Ch. 3–4

Haman's Cunning Plot,
God's People in Distress

*Feast of
Mordecai*

Ch. 5–7

Esther's Rise to Power,
Haman's Downfall

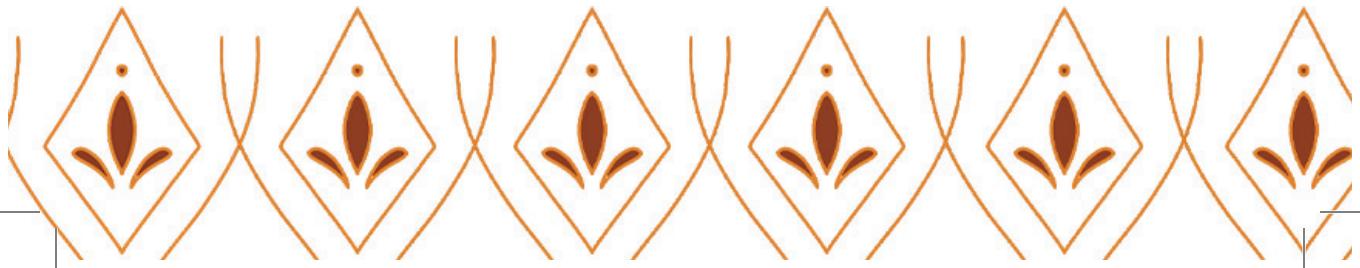
*Feast of
Esther*

Ch. 8–10

Mordecai's Exaltation,
God's People Celebrate

*Feast of
Purim*

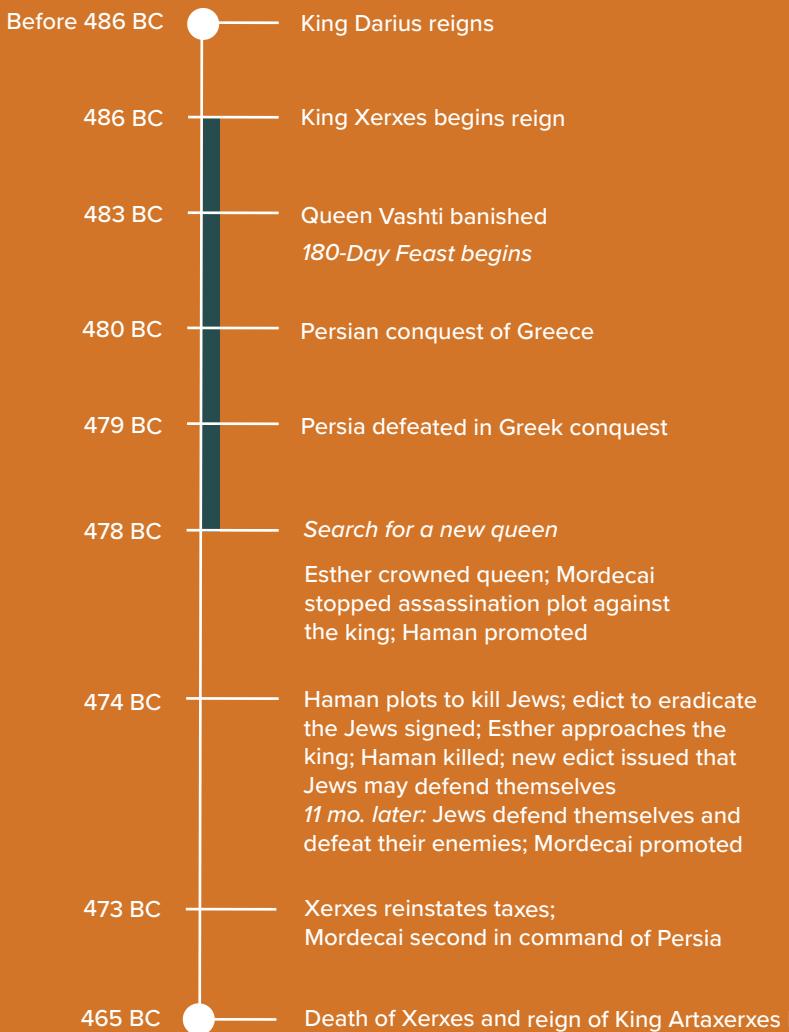
Notes



And we know that for those
who love God all things work
together for good, for those
who are called according to
his purpose.

ROMANS 8:28

FROM EXILED TO ROYALTY



Esther 1:1-22

Key: [commentary]

These events happened in the days of King Xerxes, who reigned over 127 provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia. At that time Xerxes ruled his empire from his royal throne at the fortress of Susa. [*This vast empire was the largest the world had ever seen. It covered modern day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and parts of modern-day Egypt, Sudan, Libya, and Arabia.*] In the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. He invited all the military officers of Persia and Media as well as the princes and nobles of the provinces. The celebration lasted 180 days—a tremendous display of the opulent wealth of his empire and the pomp and splendor of his majesty.

When it was all over, the king gave a banquet for all the people, from the greatest to the least, who were in the fortress of Susa. It lasted for seven days and was held in the courtyard of the palace garden. The courtyard was beautifully decorated with white cotton curtains and blue hangings, which were fastened with white linen cords and purple ribbons to silver rings embedded in marble pillars. Gold and silver couches stood on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and other costly stones.

Drinks were served in gold goblets of many designs, and there was an abundance of royal wine, reflecting the king's generosity. By edict of the king, no limits were placed on the drinking, for the king had instructed all his palace officials to serve each man as much as he wanted. [*These feasts displayed Xerxes' great power and influence. Many Gentile rulers showed their wealth, power, majesty, and generosity through feasts like this.*]

At the same time, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.

On the seventh day of the feast, when King Xerxes was in high spirits because of the wine, he told the seven eunuchs [*Eunuchs were men who were castrated in order to be trusted in overseeing the king's domestic interests, especially in protecting king's harems.*] who attended him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas—to bring Queen Vashti to him with the royal crown on her head. He wanted the nobles and all the other men to gaze on her beauty, for she was a very beautiful woman. But when they conveyed the king's order to Queen Vashti, she refused to come. This made the king furious, and he burned with anger.

He immediately consulted with his wise advisers, who knew all the Persian laws and customs, for he always asked their advice. The names of these men were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan—seven nobles of Persia and Media. They met with the king regularly and held the highest positions in the empire.

“What must be done to Queen Vashti?” the king demanded. “What penalty does the law provide for a queen who refuses to obey the king's orders, properly sent through his eunuchs?”

Memucan answered the king and his nobles, “Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but also every noble and citizen throughout your empire. Women everywhere will begin to despise their husbands when they learn that Queen Vashti has refused to appear before the king. Before this day is out, the wives of all the king’s nobles throughout Persia and Media will hear what the queen did and will start treating their husbands the same way. There will be no end to their contempt and anger.

“So if it please the king, we suggest that you issue a written decree, a law of the Persians and Medes that cannot be revoked. It should order that Queen Vashti be forever banished from the presence of King Xerxes, and that the king should choose another queen more worthy than she. [*Although she was queen, Vashti’s status and influence were fleeting. One decision led to her downfall. This sets up an interesting contrast with Esther later in the story.*] When this decree is published throughout the king’s vast empire, husbands everywhere, whatever their rank, will receive proper respect from their wives!”

The king and his nobles thought this made good sense, so he followed Memucan’s counsel. He sent letters to all parts of the empire, to each province in its own script and language, proclaiming that every man should be the ruler of his own home and should say whatever he pleases. [*The seemingly random nature of events is highlighted throughout the book of Esther. This decree happens to create a vacancy in the royal family. Is it a coincidence that Esther is chosen? The author is using these events to emphasize the theme of God’s sovereignty. His unseen hand at work even when the events seem random.*]

RESPONSE

1. Even though God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, his sovereignty is still evident even when the characters experience difficulty. Can you recall a time in your life when a circumstance in the moment seemed to not make sense, yet looking back you can recognize him moving in your life?

Esther 2:1-14

But after Xerxes' anger had subsided, he began thinking about Vashti and what she had done and the decree he had made. [*It is believed that four years have passed between the end of chapter one and the beginning of chapter two. During these four years, King Xerxes attempted a massive invasion of Greece which turned out to be unsuccessful.*] So his personal attendants suggested, "Let us search the empire to find beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint agents in each province to bring these beautiful young women into the royal harem at the fortress of Susa. Hegai, the king's eunuch in charge of the harem, will see that they are all given beauty treatments. After that, the young woman who most pleases the king will be made queen instead of Vashti." This advice was very appealing to the king, so he put the plan into effect.

At that time there was a Jewish man in the fortress of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair. [*Mordecai, Esther's cousin, came to Persia in one of the waves of deportation that the Babylonians imposed on Judah when it conquered that land.*] He was from the tribe of Benjamin and was a descendant of Kish and Shimei. His family had been among those who, with King Jehoiachin of Judah, had been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. This man had a very beautiful and lovely young cousin, Hadassah, who was also called Esther. When her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her into his family and raised her as his own daughter.

As a result of the king's decree, Esther, along with many other young women, was brought to the king's harem at the fortress of Susa and placed in Hegai's care. Hegai was very impressed with Esther and treated her kindly. He quickly ordered a special menu for her and provided her with beauty treatments. He also assigned her seven maids specially chosen from the king's palace, and he moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem. [*Esther is compelling both in her appearance and ability to connect with others. Esther is experiencing a quick reversal of her original status as a poor, exiled orphan to being very special and elevated. Only God could orchestrate this great reversal.*]

Esther had not told anyone of her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had directed her not to do so. Every day Mordecai would take a walk near the courtyard of the harem to find out about Esther and what was happening to her.

Before each young woman was taken to the king's bed, she was given the prescribed twelve months of beauty treatments—six months with oil of myrrh, followed by six months with special perfumes and ointments. [*Twelve months of beauty treatments feels excessive to us; however, this is a vastly different culture than ours.*] When it was time for her to go to the king's palace, she was given her choice of whatever clothing or jewelry she wanted to take from the harem. That evening she was taken to the king's private rooms, and the next morning she was brought to the second harem, where the king's wives lived. There

she would be under the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch in charge of the concubines. She would never go to the king again unless he had especially enjoyed her and requested her by name.

RESPONSE

1. Esther's story reflects the reality that God does not always save his people from experiencing the complicated tensions of this world. And yet, he still has the power to receive glory despite that brokenness. As Christians, we are called to live in the tension that God is in control even when we experience hard things. He can take the most broken parts of our story to change us and the world. What sinful or broken parts of your story do you struggle to believe God can use for his glory and purposes?
2. The Lord created Esther to be appealing to others both in her natural beauty and ability to connect with others. What qualities and gifts has God given you to be a blessing to his Kingdom?

Esther 2:15-20

Esther was the daughter of Abihail, who was Mordecai's uncle. (Mordecai had adopted his younger cousin Esther.) When it was Esther's turn to go to the king, she accepted the advice of Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the harem. [*Esther's humble wisdom is shown by accepting help in her preparation for the king.*] She asked for nothing except what he suggested, and she was admired by everyone who saw her.

Esther was taken to King Xerxes at the royal palace in early winter of the seventh year of his reign. And the king loved Esther more than any of the other young women. He was so delighted with her that he set the royal crown on her head and declared her queen instead of Vashti. To celebrate the occasion, he gave a great banquet in Esther's honor for all his nobles and officials, declaring a public holiday for the provinces and giving generous gifts to everyone. [*The blessing Xerxes gives to Esther is now extended to all the people.*]

Even after all the young women had been transferred to the second harem and Mordecai had become a palace official, Esther continued to keep her family background and nationality a secret. She was still following Mordecai's directions, just as she did when she lived in his home. [*Esther and Mordecai's plans are working out well; they are working together as a team as part of the kingdom. Finally, God's people are in a position of influence, but the cost of them getting there is hiding who they are and their unique relationship with God.*]

RESPONSE

1. What emotions or thoughts do you think Esther might have experienced as she approached the king?
2. Esther is advised to keep her Jewish identity a secret. Why do you think this advice was given? What does Esther's discretion reveal about the challenges she may have faced as a Jewish woman in the Persian court?

Reflection

Esther's life so far has been remarkable. She was the child of Jewish exiles who both died, raised by her cousin in a foreign and often hostile land, taken against her will into the king's harem, found favor with all she met, and was finally selected to be the queen of the realm.

Esther's story is complicated, and we don't have all the details of what she experienced. Yes, she rises to a position of status and influence. But, she is also isolated, and her life is subject to the whims of a king who doesn't have a great track record of being kind to his wives. What are we to make of the good and the challenging in this story?

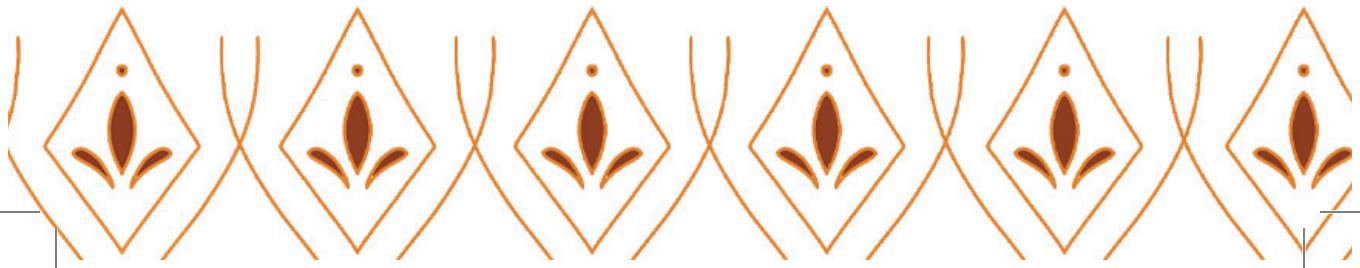
It's important to remember that every turn of the plot is under the umbrella of God's control. This extraordinary course of events isn't an accident; it's not because of luck or Esther's good looks or sparkling personality that she becomes queen. Nor is Esther being punished by being taken away from her family. God has a plan, and Esther is part of it.

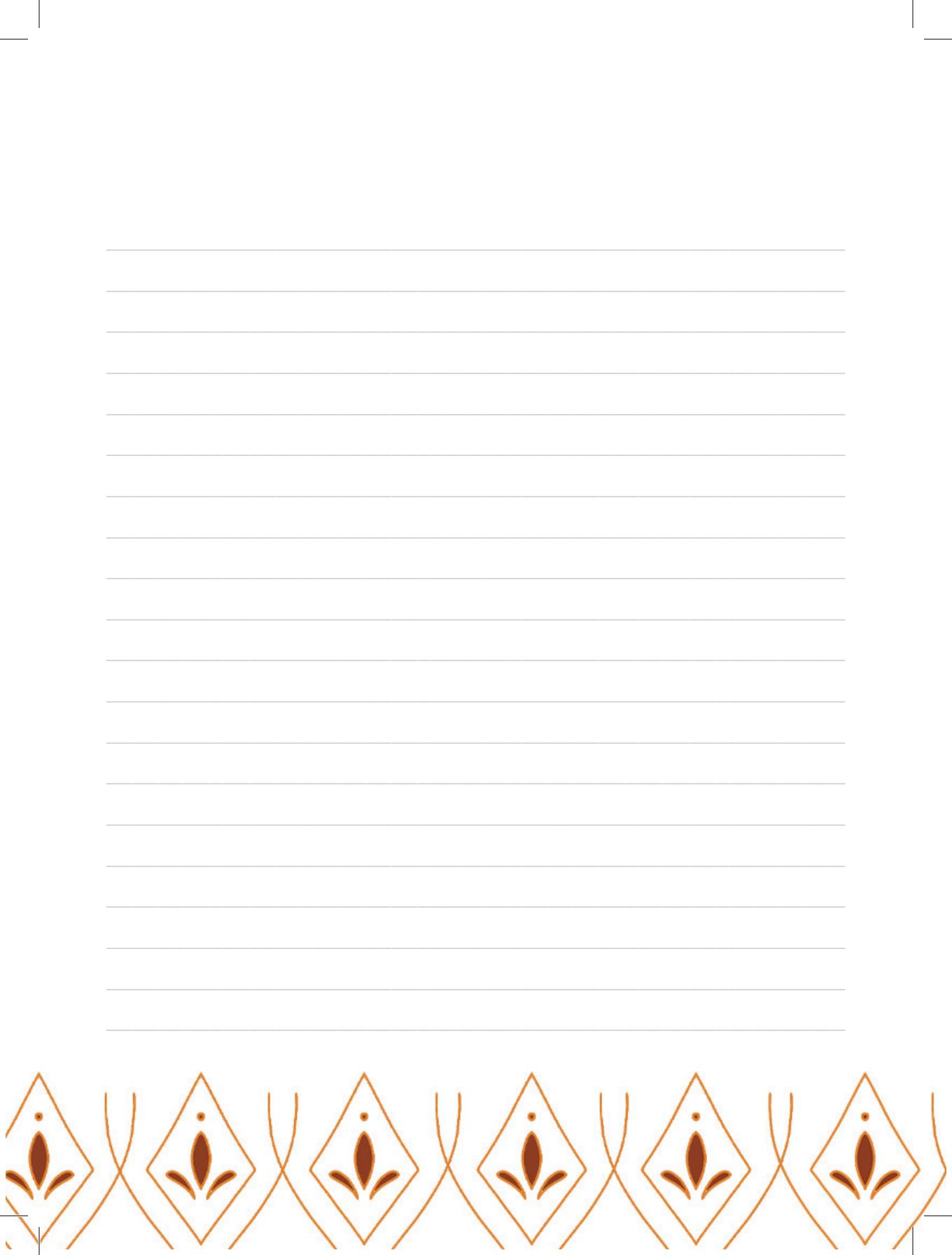
Esther's journey from an exiled orphan to a queen highlights God's ability to reverse seemingly impossible situations for his purposes. Esther's reversal is meant to stand out to us not as some random happenstance, but actually to point us to an all-powerful God who works all things together to showcase his sovereignty and redemptive power.

At the end of week one, the tension starts to build between Esther's two identities—Esther is a newly crowned queen of the largest empire of the age and also an unidentified Jewish woman. Eventually, Esther will need to choose how she will align herself and where she will find her identity.

1. What does this week reveal about humanity?
2. Esther's story contrasts the seemingly unpredictable nature of the world with an unseen God who is actually in complete control. Is this idea comforting or challenging to you?
3. What is the one major takeaway that you learned from this week?

Notes

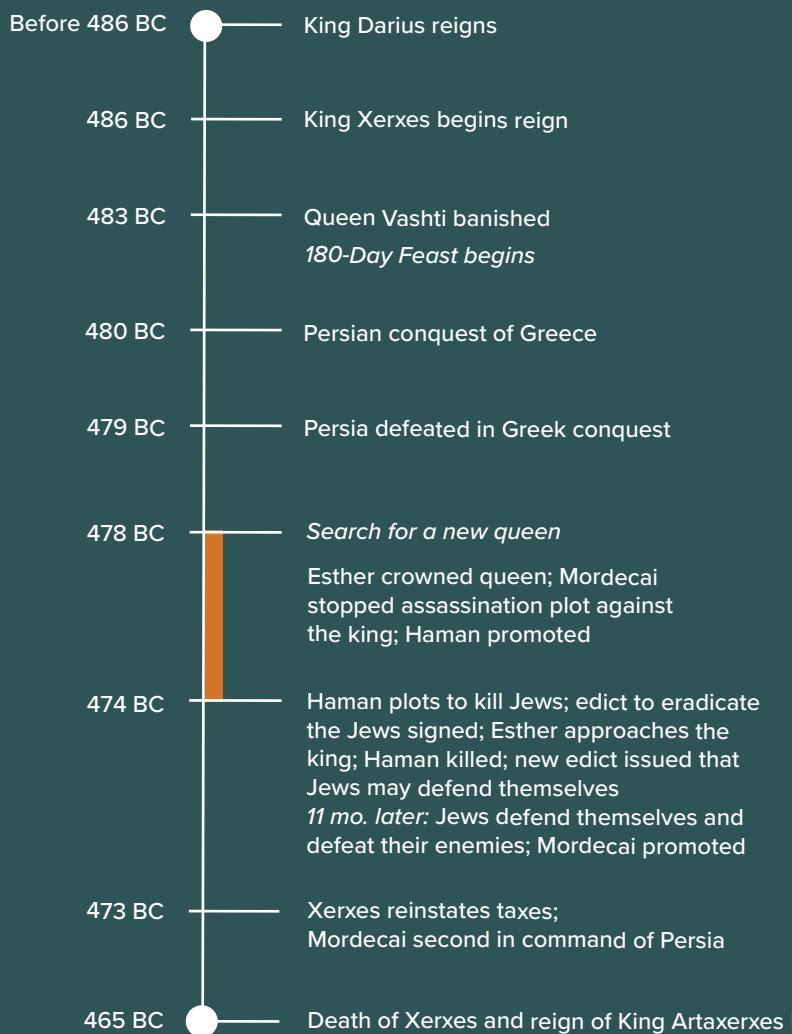




Be strong and courageous.
Do not be afraid or terrified
because of them, for the
Lord your God goes with
you; he will never leave
you nor forsake you.

DEUTERONOMY 31:6 (NIV)

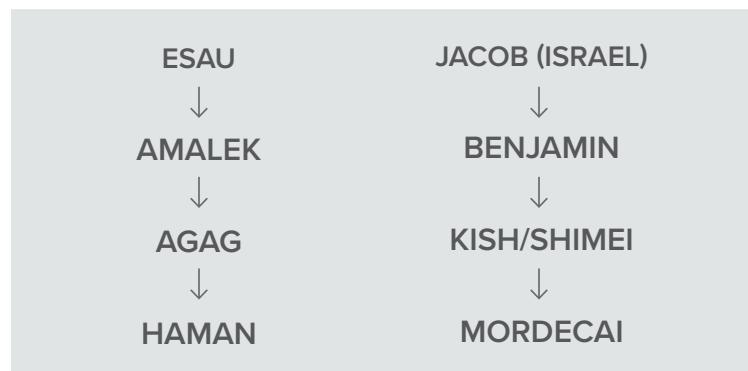
MORDECAI'S LOYALTY & HAMAN'S PLOT



Esther 2:21–3:6

One day as Mordecai was on duty at the king's gate [*This position indicates that Mordecai is associated with the decision-makers and men of influence in the kingdom*], two of the king's eunuchs, Bigthana and Teresh—who were guards at the door of the king's private quarters—became angry at King Xerxes and plotted to assassinate him. But Mordecai heard about the plot and gave the information to Queen Esther. She then told the king about it and gave Mordecai credit for the report. When an investigation was made and Mordecai's story was found to be true, the two men were impaled on a sharpened pole. This was all recorded in The Book of the History of King Xerxes' Reign.

Some time later King Xerxes promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite over all the other nobles, making him the most powerful official in the empire. [*The author wants us to notice the lineage of Haman in comparison to Mordecai. Haman is a descendant of Agag, who was the king of the Amalekites, Israel's sworn enemy for generations. The conflict between the Israelites and the Amalekites can be traced back all the way to Jacob and Esau.*]



All the king's officials would bow down before Haman to show him respect whenever he passed by, for so the king had commanded. But Mordecai refused to bow down or show him respect.

Then the palace officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why are you disobeying the king's command?" They spoke to him day after day, but still he refused to comply with the order. So they spoke to Haman about this to see if he would tolerate Mordecai's conduct, since Mordecai had told them he was a Jew.

When Haman saw that Mordecai would not bow down or show him respect, he was filled with rage. [*Haman is extremely proud and insecure; he can only consider himself successful if everyone else thinks he is a success.*] He had learned of Mordecai's nationality, so he decided it was not enough to lay hands on Mordecai alone. Instead, he looked for a way to destroy all the Jews throughout the entire empire of Xerxes.

RESPONSE

1. Haman's wounded pride drives him to lash out not only against the person threatening his pride (Mordecai), but he takes it several notches further and makes the call to wipe out all Jewish people. Why do you think Haman reacts so irrationally?
2. How does the lineage of Haman and Mordecai connect the book of Esther to the big picture narrative of the Bible?

Esther 3:7-11

So in the month of April, during the twelfth year of King Xerxes' reign, lots were cast in Haman's presence (the lots were called *purim*) [*"Pur" is the Persian word for the lot, something like dice, that was used to leave a decision to chance, or to the god who guides chance*] to determine the best day and month to take action. And the day selected was March 7, nearly a year later.

Then Haman approached King Xerxes and said, "There is a certain race of people scattered through all the provinces of your empire who keep themselves separate from everyone else. Their laws are different from those of any other people, and they refuse to obey the laws of the king. [*Haman's charge is a half-truth. Yes, the Jews were a certain people scattered and dispersed, and yes, they had their own laws. But their laws did not cause them to disobey the king.*] So it is not in the king's interest to let them live. If it please the king, issue a decree that they be destroyed, and I will give 10,000 large sacks of silver to the government administrators to be deposited in the royal treasury."

The king agreed, confirming his decision by removing his signet ring from his finger and giving it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. The king said, "The money and the people are both yours to do with as you see fit."

RESPONSE

1. The casting of lots (pur) is mentioned in verse 7 as a method to determine the date for the destruction of the Jews. What role do you think chance plays in the unfolding events in today's reading?
2. King Xerxes is seemingly unaware of the specific details of the edict he approves. What does this reveal about the king's character and leadership style?

Esther 3:12–15

So on April 17 the king's secretaries were summoned, and a decree was written exactly as Haman dictated. [*It is estimated that King Xerxes has been king for 13 years at this point.*] It was sent to the king's highest officers, the governors of the respective provinces, and the nobles of each province in their own scripts and languages. The decree was written in the name of King Xerxes and sealed with the king's signet ring. Dispatches were sent by swift messengers into all the provinces of the empire, giving the order that all Jews—young and old, including women and children—must be killed, slaughtered, and annihilated on a single day. This was scheduled to happen on March 7 of the next year. [*Because of the extent of the empire, it took almost twelve months to notify and prepare all those responsible for putting the edict into effect.*] The property of the Jews would be given to those who killed them.

A copy of this decree was to be issued as law in every province and proclaimed to all peoples, so that they would be ready to do their duty on the appointed day. At the king's command, the decree went out by swift messengers, and it was also proclaimed in the fortress of Susa. Then the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa fell into confusion.

RESPONSE

1. King Xerxes is the decision-maker in approving Haman’s decree. What responsibilities come with leadership, and how might leaders influence the lives of those they govern?
2. The prominent theme in today’s text is justice—people desiring to receive what they deserve.
 - » In what ways do you see injustice in this story?
 - » What might justice look like in this situation?
3. How do you react when decisions are made that impact our lives yet we don’t have a say in them? What’s it like to live with the consequences of someone else’s decisions?

Reflection

This week, we were introduced to Haman, an Agagite man (the Agagites are descendants of the Amalekites) whose pride and hatred led him to propose a decree to destroy the Jewish people. We learned earlier that Mordecai is a descendant from the Israelite tribe of Benjamin. The intense hatred between these two people groups can be traced back hundreds of years to the time of King Saul. Let's take a minute to review what has happened in the greater story of how God is working among his people (refer to the Biblical timeline).

King Saul's disobedience of God's command of destroying the evil Amalekites has led to this moment in Esther where an Agagite man (Haman) is once again plotting for the destruction of the Jews. In the same way that God's people are experiencing the consequences of Saul's disobedience, we too experience consequences for the disobedience of those who have gone before us—both family members and others who have power in our culture.

The week shows how individual actions, whether acts of loyalty or pride-driven decisions, can have significant consequences. The tension builds as the lives of the Jewish people hang in the balance, setting the stage for the critical role that Esther will play in the chapters to come.

BIBLICAL TIMELINE

The Amalekites attack the Israelites at Rephidim shortly after their exodus from Egypt. (Exodus 17:8–16)

God reminds the Israelites of the attack of the Amalekites who do not fear him. He commands the Israelites to destroy the Amalekites when they enter the Promised Land. (Deuteronomy 25:17–19)

God commands King Saul to destroy all of the Amalekites in retribution for their attack on Israel. Saul destroys all of the Amalekites but one, King Agag. The prophet Samuel kills King Agag. Some of the Amalekites likely escape Saul's conquest as they appear again later in history.
(1 Samuel 15:1–35)

The Amalekites plunder David's camp and steal their wives and children. In response, David destroys all of the Amalekites he can. 400 Amalekite men escaped.
(1 Samuel 30:1–31)

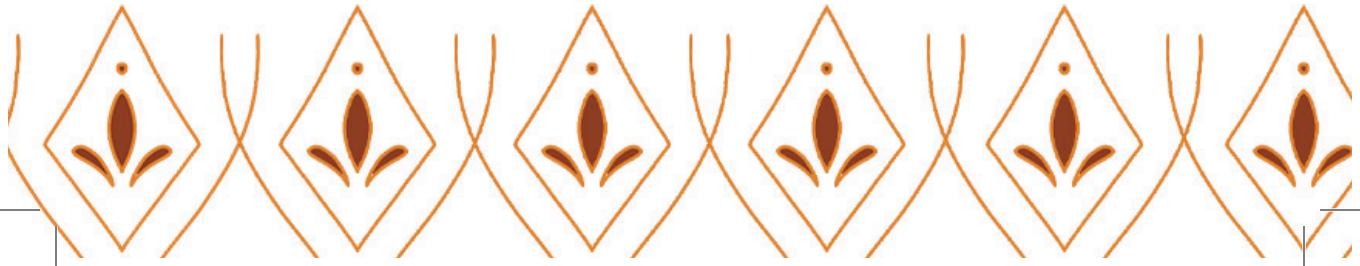
The sons of Simeon of Judah strike down a remnant of the Amalekites who lived at Mount Seir. (1 Chronicles 4:43)

Haman the Agagite, descendent of the Amalekites, plots to kill all of the Jews in Persia. (Esther 3:1–10)

Haman and those who sought to kill the Jews are destroyed, and the Jews are preserved. (Esther 7:1–10, 9:1–16)

1. How is God sovereign over your life? How do we fit into the greater story of what God is doing in the world?
2. What is the one major takeaway that you learned this week?

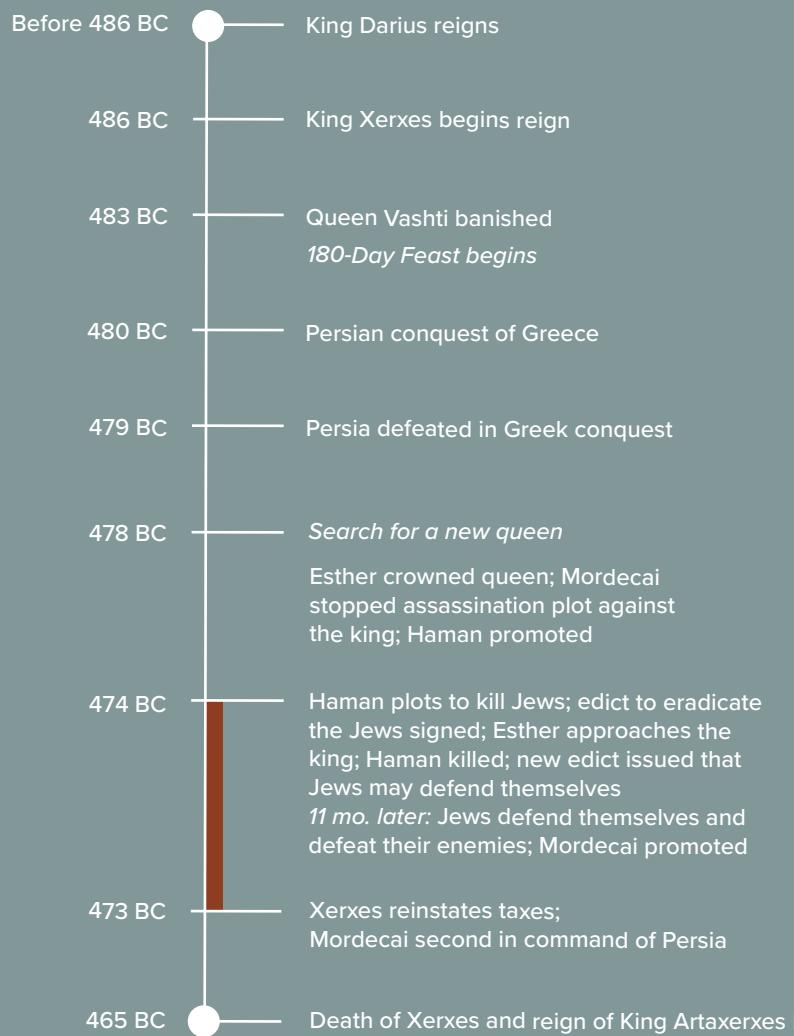
Notes



Who knows if perhaps you
were made queen for such
a time as this?

ESTHER 4:17B

A POSITION WITH PURPOSE



Esther 4:1-6

When Mordecai learned about all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on burlap and ashes, and went out into the city, crying with a loud and bitter wail. He went as far as the gate of the palace, for no one was allowed to enter the palace gate while wearing clothes of mourning. And as news of the king's decree reached all the provinces, there was great mourning among the Jews. They fasted, wept, and wailed, and many people lay in burlap and ashes. [*The author describes the visible signs of mourning, even including that they fasted, but there is no mention of prayer. This is significant because God's people were known to cry out to him in times of great anguish. Just like God is not mentioned in this book, any mention of his people acknowledging him is omitted as well.*]

When Queen Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was deeply distressed. She sent clothing to him to replace the burlap, but he refused it. Then Esther sent for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs who had been appointed as her attendant. She ordered him to go to Mordecai and find out what was troubling him and why he was in mourning. So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the square in front of the palace gate.

RESPONSE

1. How does Esther react to the news of the decree to annihilate the Jews? What emotions do you think she might be experiencing?
2. The Jewish people go into intense mourning following Haman's decree. When you receive scary or bad news, how are you tempted to react?

Esther 4:7-17

Mordecai told him the whole story, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai gave Hathach a copy of the decree issued in Susa that called for the death of all Jews. He asked Hathach to show it to Esther and explain the situation to her. He also asked Hathach to direct her to go to the king to beg for mercy and plead for her people. *[Mordecai instructs Esther to take care of her people even though he also tells her to keep her identity safe. This marks a major shift in the story.]* So Hathach returned to Esther with Mordecai's message.

Then Esther told Hathach to go back and relay this message to Mordecai: "All the king's officials and even the people in the provinces know that anyone who appears before the king in his inner court without being invited is doomed to die unless the king holds out his gold scepter. And the king has not called for me to come to him for thirty days." *[Esther is faced with a life-threatening decision. As long as Esther holds onto her identity as Queen, she is not helpful to the Jews, herself, and ultimately, God's agenda.]* So Hathach gave Esther's message to Mordecai.

Mordecai sent this reply to Esther: "Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?" *[Mordecai's trust is in the faithfulness of God, not in the faithfulness of Esther. He knows God will not let his people down—God's faithfulness is not dependent on human choices.]*

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I must die." So Mordecai went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him. *[Esther adopts a bold attitude towards her mission. She is determined to be obedient, no matter what the cost.]*

RESPONSE

1. At first, Esther hesitates in response to Mordecai's request of pleading with the king. What fears is she wrestling with, and how do these reflect the challenges she faces as queen?
2. Mordecai suggests that Esther's position as queen is not a coincidence but part of a larger plan, and he encourages her to use her position for the good of others. Who in your life reminds you of your larger role in God's plan?

Esther 5:1-8

On the third day of the fast, Esther put on her royal robes and entered the inner court of the palace, just across from the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen Esther standing there in the inner court, he welcomed her and held out the gold scepter to her. So Esther approached and touched the end of the scepter. *[As Esther approaches the king to intercede for her people, life is extended to her.]*

Then the king asked her, "What do you want, Queen Esther? What is your request? I will give it to you, even if it is half the kingdom!" *[The offer of half of the kingdom is a way for the king to say "I look on you with favor."]*

And Esther replied, "If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a banquet I have prepared for the king."

The king turned to his attendants and said, "Tell Haman to come quickly to a banquet, as Esther has requested." So the king and Haman went to Esther's banquet.

And while they were drinking wine, the king said to Esther, "Now tell me what you really want. What is your request? I will give it to you, even if it is half the kingdom!" *[The banquet is not just about honoring the king, and he knows that.]*

Esther replied, "This is my request and deepest wish. If I have found favor with the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my request and do what I ask, please come with Haman tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for you. Then I will explain what this is all about."

RESPONSE

1. Esther was calculated and intentional in the way she presented her request. Even though she was fearful, she gave the matter thought and weight. When you are in situations where a lot is at stake, how are you tempted to react? (Do you avoid the situation and procrastinate, do you jump in and react quickly without thinking it through, or maybe you shut down and do nothing?)
2. The king welcomes Esther into his presence. What does this tell us about how he views her? How is this different from the way he treated Vashti?

Reflection

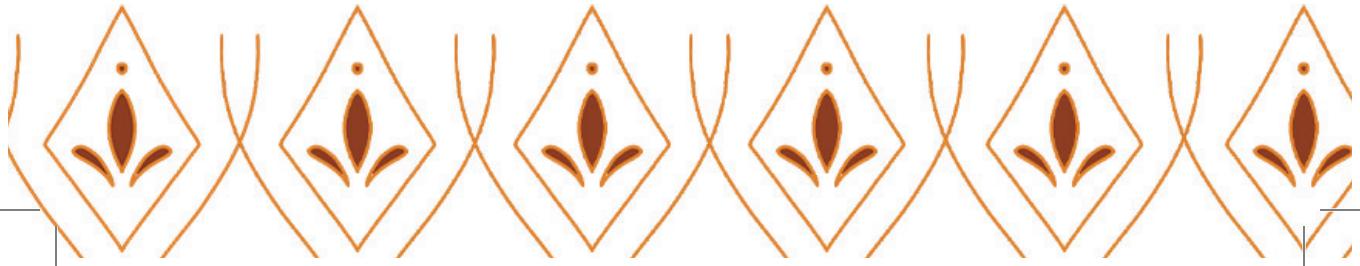
This week's reading marks a big identity shift for Esther. As she approaches the moment when she will make her request, Mordecai challenges her to step with purpose into her role as queen. To do so, she has to care more about identifying with her people (the Jews) than she cares about her identity as queen. Up to this point, Esther has been given status, wealth, and influence—how easy would it have been to simply maintain that role? Instead, she values her identity as one of God's people more than she values who she is as queen.

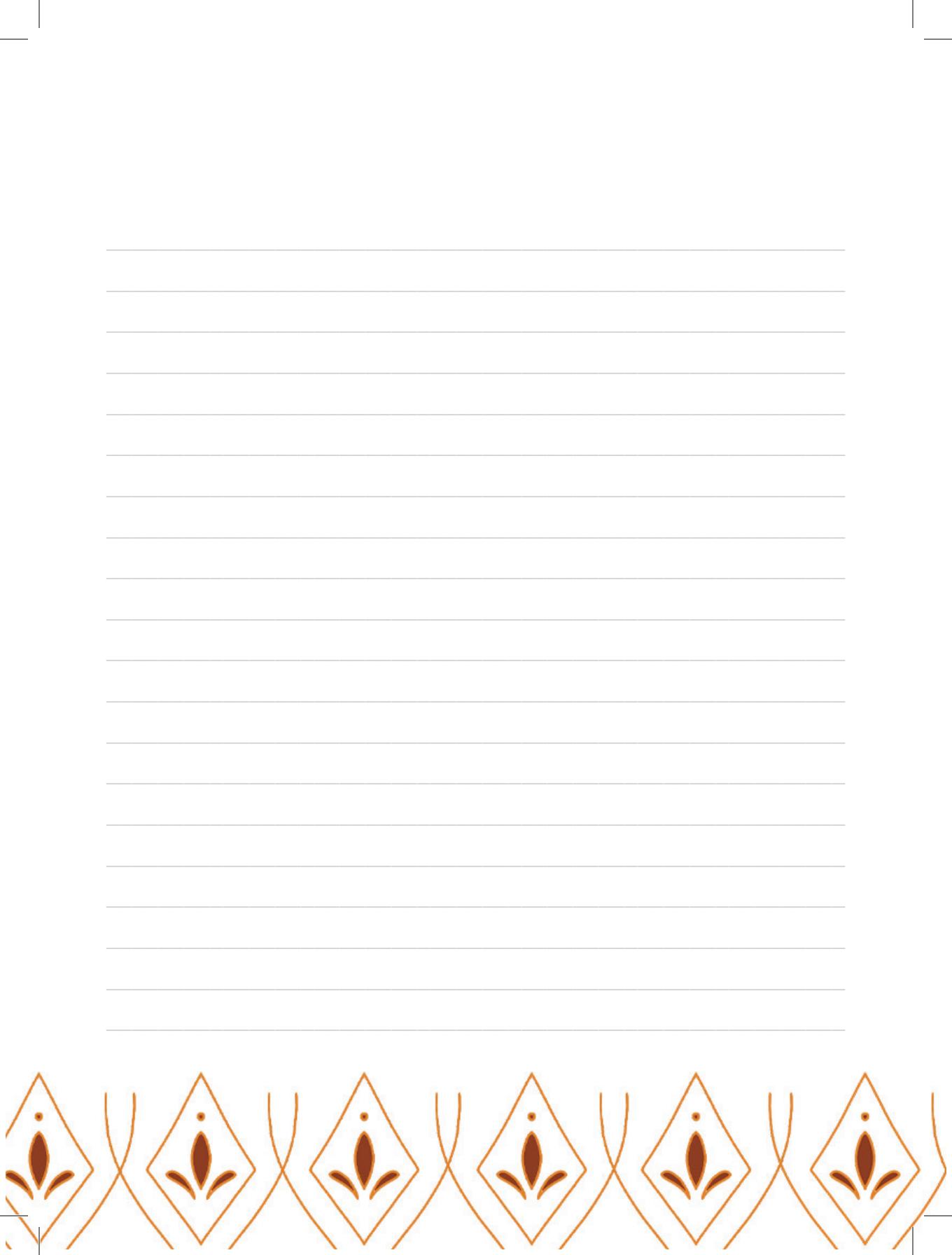
Even though God's name is not mentioned, once again, he is working behind the scenes by putting Esther in the right place at the right time—that's why Mordecai says, "Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?"

As believers, we get the opportunity to play a role in what God is doing to establish his Kingdom here on earth. We may not all gain influence and status like Esther, but God often places us in the right place at the right time to create opportunities for us to be faithful. Maybe it's being a good friend to someone who is going through a hard time, or maybe it's being helpful in your home when your parents are having a busy week. There are little ways that we can be faithful every day so that when we have to choose our identity as a child of God over the temptations of this world when the stakes are higher, we've already developed those muscles. We will be willing to face humiliation and rejection from this world because we know that choosing God is so much better.

1. What does faithfulness look like for you on a day-to-day basis?
2. In what ways do you need to “reject the world” in order to choose God? (Not being in a certain friend group, breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, confessing to a hidden sin, taking a step of obedience that you’ve been putting off)

Notes

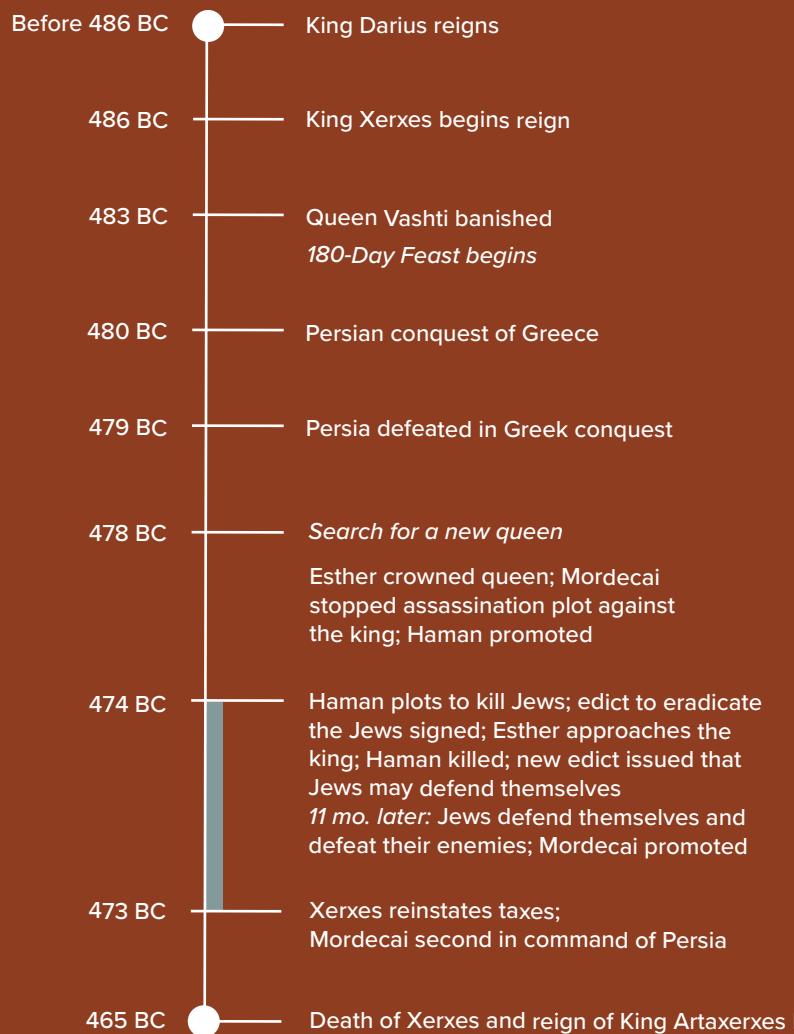




*Pride goes before destruction
and haughtiness before a fall.*

PROVERBS 16:18

THE DOWNFALL OF THE PRIDEFUL



Esther 5:9-14

Haman was a happy man as he left the banquet! But when he saw Mordecai sitting at the palace gate, not standing up or trembling nervously before him, Haman became furious. However, he restrained himself and went on home. [*Haman has to restrain himself because he is so angry at Mordecai's lack of attention.*]

Then Haman gathered together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, and boasted to them about his great wealth and his many children. [*Haman begins to unravel. His demand for affirmation from others around him will be his greatest weakness.*] He bragged about the honors the king had given him and how he had been promoted over all the other nobles and officials. [*His ego and pride fueled both his rage and his joy.*]

Then Haman added, “And that’s not all! Queen Esther invited only me and the king himself to the banquet she prepared for us. And she has invited me to dine with her and the king again tomorrow!” Then he added, “But this is all worth nothing as long as I see Mordecai the Jew just sitting there at the palace gate.” [*Haman is a slave to his emotions—nothing is ever enough. This self-obsession is idolatry, and we will see that you can never be satisfied within yourself alone.*]

So Haman’s wife, Zeresh, and all his friends suggested, “Set up a sharpened pole that stands seventy-five feet tall, and in the morning ask the king to impale Mordecai on it. When this is done, you can go on your merry way to the banquet with the king.” This pleased Haman, and he ordered the pole set up. [*Look at the type of people Haman surrounds himself with. The people we choose to be closest to are important.*]

Let’s contrast Esther and Haman:

ESTHER	HAMAN
Risks her life to save many	Sacrifices many to exalt self
Thoughtful & wise	Irrational & impulsive
Willing to die for the sake of others	Willing to kill for the sake of self

RESPONSE

1. Although God is not mentioned, he is still working and present. What do these two characters reveal about putting our trust in the Lord instead of ourselves?

2. In what ways do your emotions expose your idols?
 - » When your idols are threatened, how do you respond? (anger, frustration, fear, etc.)

3. People who are chronically prideful often find themselves in constant conflict with others. Below are three symptoms of someone who struggles with pride—which do you struggle with the most?
 - a. You get your feelings hurt often/you do not receive criticism well
 - b. You are always looking for affirmation, to be noticed
 - c. Being wrong is not an option for you

4. The people we choose to spend our time around are either going to speak truth to us or they are going to encourage our idols.
 - » What kind of community do you surround yourself with?

 - » List the people in your life who are willing to speak truth and challenge you when you are doing wrong.

Esther 6

That night the king had trouble sleeping, so he ordered an attendant to bring the book of the history of his reign so it could be read to him. In those records he discovered an account of how Mordecai had exposed the plot of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the eunuchs who guarded the door to the king's private quarters. They had plotted to assassinate King Xerxes. [*Take note of what seems like a random coincidence. What are the chances that the king cannot sleep and the story that happens to be read is about Mordecai saving his life? God is clearly at work.*]

“What reward or recognition did we ever give Mordecai for this?” the king asked.

His attendants replied, “Nothing has been done for him.”

“Who is that in the outer court?” the king inquired. As it happened, Haman had just arrived in the outer court of the palace to ask the king to impale Mordecai on the pole he had prepared. [*Again, what seems random actually highlights the theme of God's sovereignty. What are the chances that Haman would be in the king's courts on the night the king happened to decide to honor Mordecai? Nothing is by accident.*]

So the attendants replied to the king, “Haman is out in the court.”

“Bring him in,” the king ordered. So Haman came in, and the king said, “What should I do to honor a man who truly pleases me?”

Haman thought to himself, “Whom would the king wish to honor more than me?” [*Pride will cloud your vision.*] So he replied, “If the king wishes to honor someone, he should bring out one of the king's own royal robes, as well as a horse that the king himself has ridden—one with a royal emblem on its head. Let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. And let him see that the man whom the king wishes to honor is dressed in the king's robes and led through the city square on the king's horse. Have the official shout as they go, 'This is what the king does for someone he wishes to honor!'”

“Excellent!” the king said to Haman. “Quick! Take the robes and my horse, and do just as you have said for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the gate of the palace. Leave out nothing you have suggested!” [*Instead of taking Mordecai's life, Haman is now going to have to honor it.*]

So Haman took the robes and put them on Mordecai, placed him on the king's own horse, and led him through the city square, shouting, “This is what the king does for someone he wishes to honor!” Afterward Mordecai returned to the palace gate, but Haman hurried home dejected and completely humiliated. [*Pay attention—this is the first big power shift*

in the book of Esther. Esther is not even around. God is at work here, and it's going to take more than just her to save God's people.]

When Haman told his wife, Zeresh, and all his friends what had happened, his wise advisers and his wife said, “Since Mordecai—this man who has humiliated you—is of Jewish birth, you will never succeed in your plans against him. It will be fatal to continue opposing him.” *[REMEMBER: You can try to control everything, but you cannot control the consequences of your own sin.]*

While they were still talking, the king’s eunuchs arrived and quickly took Haman to the banquet Esther had prepared.

RESPONSE

1. In what ways are you tempted to be like Haman—going to great lengths to rid your life of anything that threatens your comfort or pride?
2. How do you see God at work in today's reading?

Esther 7

So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet. On this second occasion, while they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "Tell me what you want, Queen Esther. What is your request? I will give it to you, even if it is half the kingdom!"

Queen Esther replied, "If I have found favor with the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my request, I ask that my life and the lives of my people will be spared. [*Finally, Esther reveals her true identity.*] For my people and I have been sold to those who would kill, slaughter, and annihilate us. [*These are the exact words Haman used in the decree (Esther 3:13).*] If we had merely been sold as slaves, I could remain quiet, for that would be too trivial a matter to warrant disturbing the king." [*Esther has to communicate two difficult things: she has been lying about who she is, and she has to tell the king he was foolish for trusting Haman.*]

"Who would do such a thing?" King Xerxes demanded. "Who would be so presumptuous as to touch you?"

Esther replied, "This wicked Haman is our adversary and our enemy." Haman grew pale with fright before the king and queen. [*This is Haman's first time hearing that Esther is Jewish. He had no idea his decree would include the queen. Haman thought he had the situation under control—idols will deceive you.*] Then the king jumped to his feet in a rage and went out into the palace garden.

Haman, however, stayed behind to plead for his life with Queen Esther, for he knew that the king intended to kill him. [*Another major power shift—instead of the king and Haman having the power, the king and queen have the power.*] In despair he fell on the couch where Queen Esther was reclining, just as the king was returning from the palace garden.

The king exclaimed, "Will he even assault the queen right here in the palace, before my very eyes?" And as soon as the king spoke, his attendants covered Haman's face, signaling his doom. [*Haman is going to die for a crime he did not even commit (assaulting the queen). Is that not the same thing he was trying to do to the Jews?*]

Then Harbona, one of the king's eunuchs, said, "Haman has set up a sharpened pole that stands seventy-five feet tall in his own courtyard. He intended to use it to impale Mordecai, the man who saved the king from assassination."

"Then impale Haman on it!" the king ordered. So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai, and the king's anger subsided.

RESPONSE

1. Read Proverbs 16:18–19. What ultimately led to Haman’s downfall?
2. We have talked a lot about how randomness in the book of Esther is actually God working behind the scenes. Where do we see that in today’s reading?
3. How does the relationship with the king and Esther compare to the way that the king treated Vashti in the beginning of the book?

Reflection

This week, the plot in Esther's story has taken some interesting turns. Haman's downfall and Queen Esther's intercession on behalf of her people go hand in hand. Although God's name is not mentioned, he is clearly at work behind the scenes. As readers, we can learn two things about our relation to God.

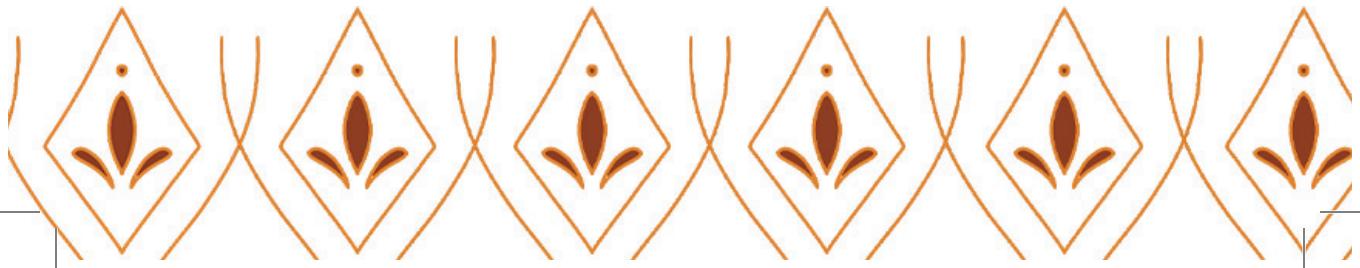
First, God is paying attention to our actions. There are real consequences for our sinfulness, and having discernment in our decisions is important. Haman was an impulsive person who made poor choices because he wanted to protect his own pride. His desire for comfort and praise ended up being his downfall. It's important for us to remember that God is always watching, and while we might think we are in control, ultimately, no one can control or predict the consequences of their sins.

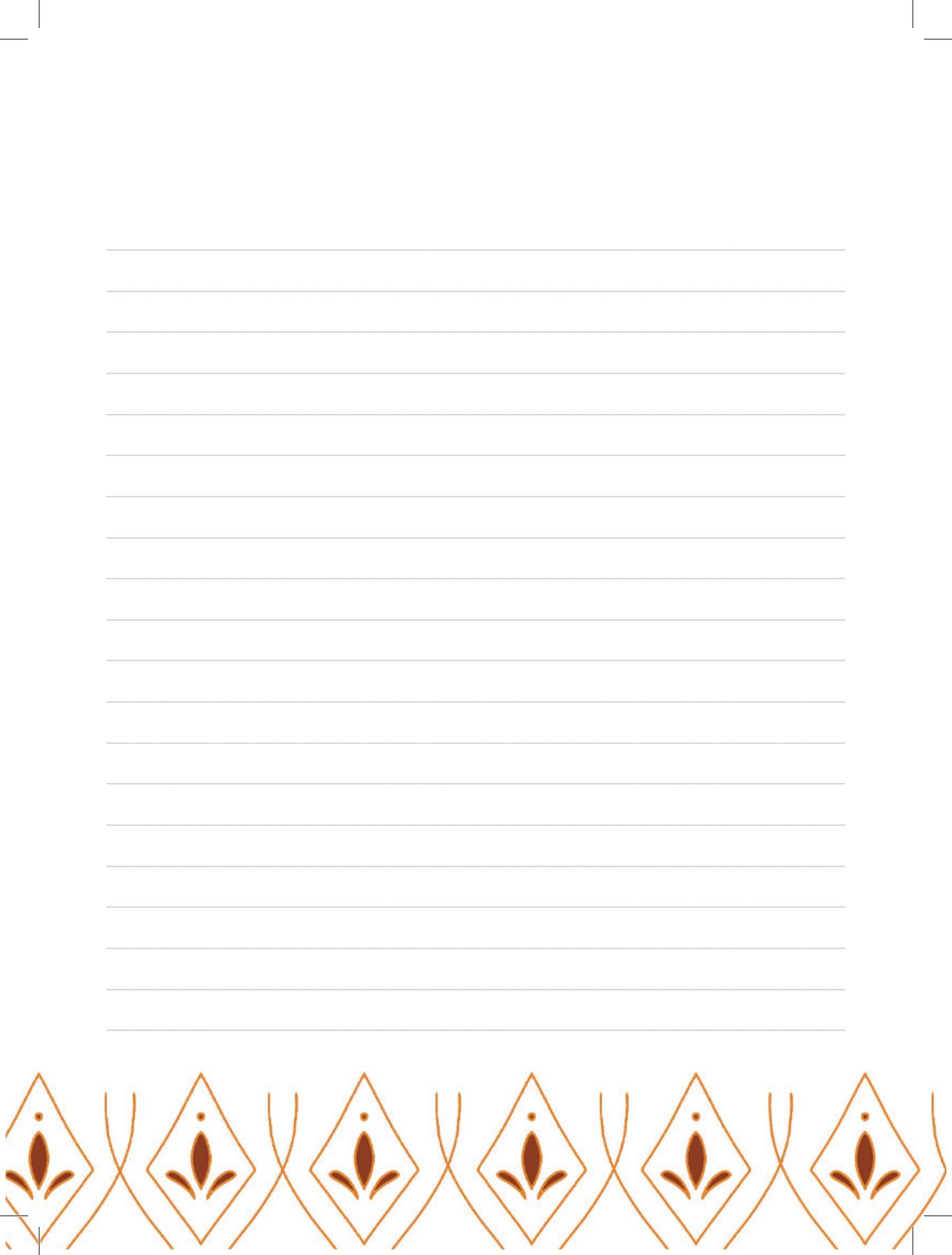
Secondly, God is always moving and working in unique ways even when we don't understand what he is doing. In Esther's story, many events seem like random coincidence—the king is restless one night and he happens to read a story that made him want to honor Mordecai. What looks random in the story is actually God's sovereign hand at work.

Do you ever find yourself tempted to believe God isn't paying any attention? Maybe you are praying for direction about something and feel like the right thing isn't clear. Maybe you are going through a really hard season where you have been praying for someone you love and God isn't answering the way you want him to. Or, maybe you are in a season where consequences of your own sin have caused you to feel like God is distant and uncaring. The story of Esther might come as an encouragement to some—God is present and working, even when you can't see him. It also might come as a wake up call for others—our sin has consequences and we are only fooling ourselves if we think that we can get away with it forever.

1. Is the story of Esther more of an encouragement or a wake-up call to you? How so?
2. Think of a time when you felt like God was distant. Looking back, how can you see he was actually working things out even when you didn't see/feel it?

Notes





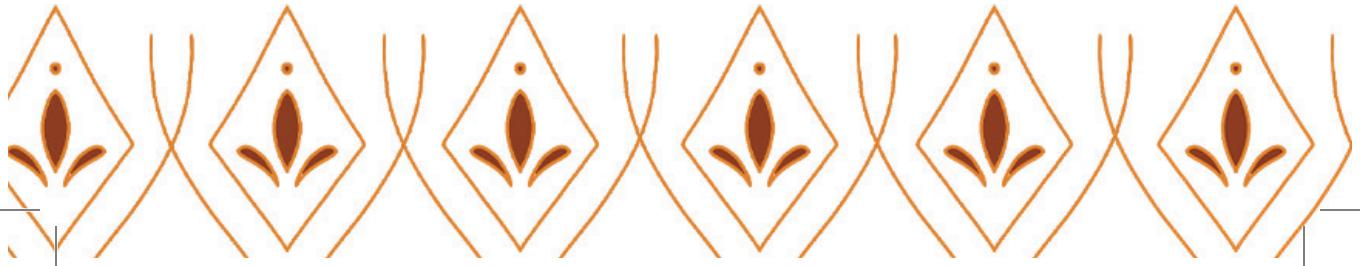
God at Work in My Story

In the story of Esther, God is never mentioned, but even in a pagan society being led by a non-believing king, God is still in control and all things work out according to his purposes.

Spend some time reflecting on and writing down moments in your life when you have seen God's faithfulness. Even when it seemed like everything was out of control, God was still in charge and working things out according to his purpose.

How does this impact your view of God? How have these moments impacted your relationship and your dependence on God?





*Their sorrow was turned
into gladness and their
mourning into joy.*

ESTHER 9:22B

REMEMBRANCE



Esther 8

On that same day King Xerxes gave the property of Haman, the enemy of the Jews, to Queen Esther. Then Mordecai was brought before the king, for Esther had told the king how they were related. The king took off his signet ring—which he had taken back from Haman—and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed Mordecai to be in charge of Haman's property. *[Another power shift: Mordecai is given the role that was once Haman's.]*

Then Esther went again before the king, falling down at his feet and begging him with tears to stop the evil plot devised by Haman the Agagite against the Jews. *[Pay attention to the posture change here. Her first request is calculated, powerful, and direct. Her second is vulnerable and pleading.]* Again the king held out the gold scepter to Esther. So she rose and stood before him. *[Although Esther has taken the role of queen, her identity is not wrapped up in being the queen. Her identity is in being a Jew, belonging to God's people.]*

Esther said, “If it please the king, and if I have found favor with him, and if he thinks it is right, and if I am pleasing to him, let there be a decree that reverses the orders of Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, who ordered that Jews throughout all the king's provinces should be destroyed. For how can I endure to see my people and my family slaughtered and destroyed?” *[Esther does not distance herself from her people's suffering. Her new influence and status do not fog her view on reality.]*

Then King Xerxes said to Queen Esther and Mordecai the Jew, “I have given Esther the property of Haman, and he has been impaled on a pole because he tried to destroy the Jews. Now go ahead and send a message to the Jews in the king's name, telling them whatever you want, and seal it with the king's signet ring. But remember that whatever has already been written in the king's name and sealed with his signet ring can never be revoked.” *[Once an edict is signed and in place, no one can take it back, not even the king. Now, the problem is given over to Esther and Mordecai to be responsible for.]*

So on June 25 the king's secretaries were summoned, and a decree was written exactly as Mordecai dictated. It was sent to the Jews and to the highest officers, the governors, and the nobles of all the 127 provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia. The decree was written in the scripts and languages of all the peoples of the empire, including that of the Jews. The decree was written in the name of King Xerxes and sealed with the king's signet ring. Mordecai sent the dispatches by swift messengers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king's service.

The king's decree gave the Jews in every city authority to unite to defend their lives. They were allowed to kill, slaughter, and annihilate anyone of any nationality or province who might attack them or their children and wives, and to take the property of their enemies. The day chosen for this event throughout all the provinces of King Xerxes was March 7 of the next year.

A copy of this decree was to be issued as law in every province and proclaimed to all peoples, so that the Jews would be ready to take revenge on their enemies on the appointed day. So urged on by the king's command, the messengers rode out swiftly on fast horses bred for the king's service. The same decree was also proclaimed in the fortress of Susa. [*The unwinding of evil is a long, difficult, process.*]

Then Mordecai left the king's presence, wearing the royal robe of blue and white, the great crown of gold, and an outer cloak of fine linen and purple. And the people of Susa celebrated the new decree. The Jews were filled with joy and gladness and were honored everywhere. [*Tension: they celebrate the small victory, but there is still a battle to be fought.*] In every province and city, wherever the king's decree arrived, the Jews rejoiced and had a great celebration and declared a public festival and holiday. And many of the people of the land became Jews themselves, for they feared what the Jews might do to them.

RESPONSE

1. Esther did not distance herself from the suffering of her people. How do you engage with suffering? Are you willing to walk through hard times with others, or do you try to create distance from those who are experiencing difficulty?
2. The Jewish people were able to celebrate a small victory, even if the battle still had to be fought. In many ways, that's how believers live on this side of Heaven. There is a lot to celebrate as a believer, but this world is broken and evil still exists. How have you seen this reality in your own life?

FOR A BOOK THAT DOES NOT MENTION GOD'S NAME, THERE ARE MANY WAYS ESTHER REFLECTS THE GOSPEL.

THE BOOK OF ESTHER	THE GOSPEL
The Jewish people sentenced to death	Humanity sentenced to death
Esther is a courageous mediator	Christ is our courageous mediator
The gift of life where death seemed certain	The gift of life where death seemed certain
A sovereign God	A sovereign God

Esther 9

So on March 7 the two decrees of the king were put into effect. On that day, the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but quite the opposite happened. It was the Jews who overpowered their enemies. [*The final power shift happens when the Jews are allowed to defend themselves.*] The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the king's provinces to attack anyone who tried to harm them. But no one could make a stand against them, for everyone was afraid of them. [*What caused the people to be afraid?*] And all the nobles of the provinces, the highest officers, the governors, and the royal officials helped the Jews for fear of Mordecai. For Mordecai had been promoted in the king's palace, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces as he became more and more powerful.

So the Jews went ahead on the appointed day and struck down their enemies with the sword. They killed and annihilated their enemies and did as they pleased with those who hated them. In the fortress of Susa itself, the Jews killed 500 men. They also killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, and Vaizatha—the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. [*Look at how the consequences of our sins can last for generations. Again, we cannot control the consequences of our sin—even the way that it affects other people.*] But they did not take any plunder. [*It wasn't about conquest or riches. It was about survival and protection for the Jews.*]

That very day, when the king was informed of the number of people killed in the fortress of Susa, he called for Queen Esther. He said, “The Jews have killed 500 men in the fortress of Susa alone, as well as Haman's ten sons. If they have done that here, what has happened in the rest of the provinces? But now, what more do you want? It will be granted to you; tell me and I will do it.”

Esther responded, “If it please the king, give the Jews in Susa permission to do again tomorrow as they have done today, and let the bodies of Haman's ten sons be impaled on a pole.”

So the king agreed, and the decree was announced in Susa. And they impaled the bodies of Haman's ten sons. Then the Jews at Susa gathered together on March 8 and killed 300 more men, and again they took no plunder. [*Whenever you see judgment for sin in Scripture, there are two outcomes: condemnation and salvation. In this case, there was condemnation for those who opposed God's people and salvation for God's people.*]

Meanwhile, the other Jews throughout the king's provinces had gathered together to defend their lives. They gained relief from all their enemies, killing 75,000 of those who hated them. But they did not take any plunder. This was done throughout the provinces on March 7, and on March 8 they rested, celebrating their victory with a day of feasting and gladness. (The Jews at Susa killed their enemies on March 7 and again on March 8, then

rested on March 9, making that their day of feasting and gladness.) So to this day, rural Jews living in remote villages celebrate an annual festival and holiday on the appointed day in late winter, when they rejoice and send gifts of food to each other. [*The book of Esther started with a celebration that honored the king. Now, the book will end with a celebration for the victory of God's people.*]

Mordecai recorded these events and sent letters to the Jews near and far, throughout all the provinces of King Xerxes, calling on them to celebrate an annual festival on these two days. He told them to celebrate these days with feasting and gladness and by giving gifts of food to each other and presents to the poor. This would commemorate a time when the Jews gained relief from their enemies, when their sorrow was turned into gladness and their mourning into joy. [*This is what salvation does for humanity.*]

So the Jews accepted Mordecai's proposal and adopted this annual custom. Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews, had plotted to crush and destroy them on the date determined by casting lots (the lots were called purim). But when Esther came before the king, he issued a decree causing Haman's evil plot to backfire, and Haman and his sons were impaled on a sharpened pole. That is why this celebration is called Purim, because it is the ancient word for casting lots. [*Remember: Haman chose the day that the Jews would be killed by casting lots.*]

So because of Mordecai's letter and because of what they had experienced, the Jews throughout the realm agreed to inaugurate this tradition and to pass it on to their descendants and to all who became Jews. They declared they would never fail to celebrate these two prescribed days at the appointed time each year. These days would be remembered and kept from generation to generation and celebrated by every family throughout the provinces and cities of the empire. This Festival of Purim would never cease to be celebrated among the Jews, nor would the memory of what happened ever die out among their descendants. [*God's people made rememberance an important part of their culture and traditions. When he provided protection or rescue, they established festivals so they would never forget God's faithfulness.*]

Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, along with Mordecai the Jew, wrote another letter putting the queen's full authority behind Mordecai's letter to establish the Festival of Purim. Letters wishing peace and security were sent to the Jews throughout the 127 provinces of the empire of Xerxes. These letters established the Festival of Purim—an annual celebration of these days at the appointed time, decreed by both Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther. (The people decided to observe this festival, just as they had decided for themselves and their descendants to establish the times of fasting and mourning.) So the command of Esther confirmed the practices of Purim, and it was all written down in the records.

RESPONSE

1. Consider how you live your daily life. How does that reveal who you truly believe is in control, you or God?
2. What does it look like to remember God's faithfulness in your life?
 - » How can you add this discipline into your regular worship of God?
3. Take a minute to journal out the ways that you have seen God show up in your life over the last week, month, or even year.

Esther 10

[Chapter 9 ends on a high note of celebration only to enter into the last chapter where daily life goes back to being a grind. Life is not made right for the Jews because of one victory.] King Xerxes imposed a tribute throughout his empire, even to the distant coastlands. [This means that the king imposed a tax people would have to pay to the kingdom] His great achievements and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai, whom the king had promoted, are recorded in The Book of the History of the Kings of Media and Persia. Mordecai the Jew became the prime minister, with authority next to that of King Xerxes himself. He was very great among the Jews, who held him in high esteem, because he continued to work for the good of his people and to speak up for the welfare of all their descendants. [True freedom has not come yet for the Jews. They are still awaiting a promised King and full deliverance. After this victory, they are still in captivity by the Persian empire, longing for a Savior.]

RESPONSE

1. Why is this chapter of Esther important? Why not just leave the book at chapter 9 with the Jews celebrating and end on a high note?
2. What does it look like to have joy in the day-to-day of life because of what God has done for you while still living in the messiness of this world?

Reflection

As we wrap up the book of Esther, we are left with a heavy tension that God's people have experienced a big victory and yet they still have to live day-to-day under the control of the Persian Empire. They are rescued from the current moment of distress and fear, but they are still being held captive, slaves to a kingdom to which they do not belong. God's people are still longing for a Savior to save them—they are longing for ultimate freedom.

This is how Christians are also living today. Yes, Christ has come and defeated death. He came and died for our sins, giving us a level of freedom that did not exist before. And yet, the battle is not over. We still live in a daily fight against our own brokenness and the brokenness of the world. Evil is not done away with yet. We live with the promise of Christ's return, but we are currently in a gap of time where it has not yet happened. That creates tension for us just like it did for the Jews at the end of the book of Esther.

So, the challenge for us, just like it was for them, is how do we live in that tension faithfully? This is why they set up ways to remember. They established a yearly celebration where they would reflect on God's faithfulness and how he once delivered them from what seemed to be an impossible situation. These rhythms helped them worship God for his goodness and faithfulness even though daily life was still hard and they were still in captivity. This is how they were able to live faithfully in the tension—creating the opportunity to remember and worship.

1. How can you intentionally remember God's goodness and faithfulness in your life?
2. Christ's death frees us from our sin and brokenness, but yet, brokenness still exists in the world today. Are there ways that you have felt the tension of living in the "not yet"?

Recap of the Book of Esther

1. How did you see God working in a book that never mentions his name?
2. What is one big takeaway for you after studying the book of Esther?
3. How did you see the book of Esther play a role in the Biblical narrative as a whole?

