

OVERVIEW OF ESTHER

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I. Background

A. The events in Esther take place in the reign of the Persian king Xerxes (486-465 B.C.). You will recall that the Persians displaced the Babylonians as the dominant world power in 539 B.C. when a Mede and Persian alliance headed by Cyrus conquered the capital city of Babylon.

B. Many Jews returned to Judea in 538 B.C. pursuant to Cyrus's decree and began to rebuild the temple, a job which they put off completing until 516 B.C. A number of Jews, however, chose to stay where they were, content to be a minority group of foreigners.

II. The Danger - 3:1-15

A. We're told in 3:1 that King Xerxes elevated one of his nobles, a man named Haman, above all the others. Now Haman just happens to be a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king against whom Israel's king Saul had fought (1 Samuel 15) some 540 years earlier.

B. From the time of the Exodus in the 15th century B.C., there had been a history of conflict between Israel and the Amalekites.

1. In Exodus 17 the Amalekites attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. After the battle, Moses said (17:16), "The Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation."

2. Israel was charged with "blotting out the name of Amalek from under heaven" (Deut. 25:17-19; Ex. 17:14; 1 Sam. 15:23), and intermittent conflict with the Amalekites dots the biblical record (Judg. 3:13, 5:14, 6:3, 6:33, 7:12, 10:12; 1 Sam. 27:8, 30:13-18; 1 Chron. 4:43).

3. King Saul had been instructed to destroy the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15), but he disobeyed and ultimately was defeated and lost his dynasty as a result (1 Sam. 28:18).

4. Agag appears in an oracle of Balaam (Num. 24:7) as an inveterate opponent of Israel.

C. Mordecai, a Jew living in Susa and probably a member of the king's court, refused to kneel before Haman and pay him honor. As it happens, Mordecai is a Benjamite from the clan of Kish, the father of King Saul.

1. The longstanding hostility between Israel and the Amalekites is probably, at least from his perspective, why he refused to honor Haman.

2. Note: Jews did not consider bowing down in honor of someone a violation of the first or second commandments. See, e.g., Gen. 33:3; 1 Sam. 20:41, 24:8; 2 Sam. 14:4; 1 Kings 1:16. This is different than worshiping an idol as in Daniel 3.

D. When Haman learns of Mordecai's snub and that he is a Jew, he is furious. He then convinces Xerxes to permit him to decree, in the king's name, that on a particular day the Jews in the kingdom are to be annihilated. It's like a law that says on November 15 all Chinese in America are to be killed.

III. God's Advance Work - 1:1 - 2:23

A. Long before Haman was exalted by King Xerxes, it just so happened that Mordecai had an incredibly attractive cousin whom he had raised as a daughter after her parents died. This young woman was named Hadassah, but she was also known as Esther.

B. It just so happened that Queen Vashti refused King Xerxes's request to appear before him, so she was banished from his presence and a kingdom-wide search was begun for her replacement.

C. It just so happened that Esther was chosen to be queen in place of Vashti.

D. It just so happened that Mordecai, who was probably in the king's court as a result of Esther, learned of a plot to assassinate Xerxes and passed that information on to the king by way of Esther.

E. All of these things were important parts of God's working on behalf of his people, but none would have been recognized as such until after the fact. It's when looking back on life that one can see most clearly the hand of God.

IV. Esther's Responsibility to Act - 4:1-17

A. Mordecai urges Esther to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

1. At this point the king does not know Esther is a Jew. She had kept that quiet at Mordecai's instruction.

2. Esther initially balks at the idea because she has not been summoned into the king's presence, and anyone who approaches him uninvited is to be killed. The only exception is if the king chooses to spare the person's life.

B. In 4:12-14 Mordecai sends the following word back to Esther: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

1. One cannot ignore the will of God with impunity. It may appear to her that she can ignore her responsibility and escape unharmed, but Mordecai tells her that is an illusion.

2. Though God has "set the table" for deliverance, Esther still must choose to act. She must do what she can with what she has been given. If she doesn't, God will bring deliverance from somewhere else, but that is not the question before her. The question before her is will she act with courageous devotion.

3. As you and I face opportunities in our lives to influence people for God, we need to remember that we may have come to that position for such a time as that. God has given us that opportunity with friends, family members, and brothers and sisters in Christ to influence them in a God-glorifying way.

C. Esther asks Mordecai to have all the Jews in Susa join her and her maids in a three-day fast, during which time they would undoubtedly be praying, and says that when this is done she will go before the king.

1. This speaks volumes about humbling oneself before God and calling out for his strength and intercession in times of difficulty.

2. We face all kinds of crises in our lives, but how often do we devote ourselves to prayer regarding them? We'll complain and read every self-help book on the market before we'll pour our hearts out before God.

V. Deliverance - 5:1 - 10:3

A. Esther approached the king, and he just so happened to receive her. Rather than make her request then, she asked that the king and Haman attend a banquet she had prepared for the king. At the banquet, she asked that they return the next day for another banquet, and she promised to present her request to the king at that time.

B. It just so happens that the king had insomnia that night and ordered that the record of his reign be brought in and read to him.

C. It just so happened that the record of Mordecai's reporting the assassination plot was read. The king then learns that nothing had been done to honor Mordecai, so he asks Haman what he should do to honor someone really special.

1. Haman thinks the king is speaking of him, so he says he should put his robe on the guy and have the noblest prince lead him through the city on the king's horse shouting, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor."

2. The king loves the idea, and has Haman lead Mordecai around on his horse!

D. At the second banquet, Esther asks the king to spare her people who had been targeted for destruction by Haman. Needless to say, the king is not pleased, and Haman is hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for hanging Mordecai. Haman's estate is then given to Esther. The moral is "don't mess with God" (see, 6:13b).

E. Since no law of the Persians could be revoked, the king authorized issuance of a decree that, on the day set for their slaughter, the Jews could assemble as a military force and kill those seeking to kill them. On that day (and in Susa the decree was extended for another day) the Jews completely reversed their fortune and wound up slaughtering their enemies.

F. This is the origin of the Jewish festival of Purim (on 13-14 Adar, which month corresponds to Feb.-Mar.). The name of the festival derives from the Akkadian word *puru*, "lot" (3:7), and refers to the lots cast by Haman to pick the day of Jewish annihilation.