

The Book of Esther⁹

Lesson 5

Esther Chapter 8, 9 and 10

473 BC

The heinous Haman, the culprit of the catastrophic plan, met his end on the gallows but the edict is still in place and the Jews face slaughter at the end of the year unless the king can do something to intervene. Esther still needs to convince the king to save her people.

Esther's Grief

Esther^{8:3} Then Esther spoke again to the king, fell at his feet, wept, and implored him to avert the evil *scheme* of Haman the Agagite and his plot which he had devised against the Jews. ⁴ And the king extended the golden scepter to Esther. So Esther arose and stood before the king.

From the context of the passage, it appears that Xerxes leaves Esther's banquet area and returns to the throne room where he picks up his scepter which is kept in the throne room except for public displays and gatherings. Esther follows the king and falls at his feet as he sits on the throne. She pleads for a way to avert Haman's scheme. Xerxes uses the scepter to draw Esther's attention and she rises from the floor to look into his eyes.

Esther's Explanation

Esther^{8:5} Then she said, " If it pleases the king and if I have found favor before him and the matter *seems* proper to the king and I am pleasing in his sight, let it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the king's provinces. ⁶ "For how can I endure to see the calamity which shall befall my people, and how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?"

In desperation, Esther pleads again for the king to revoke Haman's letter. The passage does not indicate the severity of the predicament for the king. He cannot revoke the letter that originally carried his seal of approval. The law of the Medes and the Persians requires that an edict, lawfully written and sealed with the ring of the king, not be broken for any reason. If it is important enough to bear the seal, then it is important enough that the king should not change his mind. The law ensures that the king and other leaders will not enact a regulation that they will later regret. It is to ensure that the governmental answer to a public problem is not hastily enacted. Laws are to be thought through and carefully crafted for the good of everyone. Twice in this story, Xerxes fails to think through the problems and he allows decrees to be made which will bring regret and harm to the people and the king.

King's Decision

Esther^{8:7} So King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given the house of Haman to Esther, and him they have hanged on the gallows because he had stretched out his hands against the Jews. ⁸ "Now you write to the Jews as you see fit, in the king's name, and seal *it* with the king's signet ring; for a decree which is written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's signet ring may not be revoked."

⁹ All Scriptures in this lesson entitled "The Book of Esther" are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, Copyright (C) 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Xerxes invests Esther and Mordecai with the task and authority to devise a way to thwart the decree issued by Haman. "Now you write to the Jews as you see fit, in the king's name, and seal *it* with the king's signet ring; for a decree which is written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's signet ring may not be revoked," Xerxes says. The fate of the Jewish people rests in the hands of the Queen of Persia and its Prime Minister, both Jews.

Scribe's Assembled

Esther^{8:9} So the king's scribes were called at that time in the third month (that is, the month Sivan), on the twenty-third day; and it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded to the Jews, the satraps, the governors, and the princes of the provinces which *extended* from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to every province according to its script, and to every people according to their language, as well as to the Jews according to their script and their language.

The story now reveals the length of time between the decrees of Haman and Mordecai. Haman's decree left the palace on Nisan 13th of 473 BC. Mordecai's decree leaves the palace on Sivan 23rd of 473 BC. Exactly 70 days or ten weeks have transpired between the two decrees. Haman's original decree has not reached all the provinces of the Persian Empire by the time Mordecai's decree leaves the palace. In some areas of the empire, Jews will still be devastated by the news, not knowing an answer has already been devised and is on the way!

Decree's Sent

Esther^{8:10} And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus, and sealed it with the king's signet ring, and sent letters by couriers on horses, riding on steeds sired by the royal stud. ¹¹ In them the king granted the Jews who were in each and every city *the right* to assemble and to defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate the entire army of any people or province which might attack them, including children and women, and to plunder their spoil, ¹² on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the thirteenth *day* of the twelfth month (that is, the month Adar). ¹³ A copy of the edict to be issued as law in each and every province, was published to all the peoples, so that the Jews should be ready for this day to avenge themselves on their enemies. ¹⁴ The couriers, hastened and impelled by the king's command, went out, riding on the royal steeds; and the decree was given out in Susa the capital.

Haman's decree cannot be revoked by the king, but he gives the Jews the right to bear arms and defend themselves from those in the empire who wish to enact Haman's desires. On the same day that Haman's decree calls for the slaughter of every Jew, Mordecai's decree offers amnesty to the Jewish people who wish to fight back. Additionally, the Jews may plunder the belongings of those who intend to do them harm without any repercussion from the king and his government. If all goes well for the Jews, the 13th of Adar in the 12th month of the year will bring great wealth to every Jew in the Persian Empire.

Mordecai's Display

Esther^{8:15} Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a large crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple; and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. ¹⁶ For the Jews there was light and gladness and joy and honor. ¹⁷ And in each and every province, and in each and every city, wherever the king's commandment and his decree arrived, there was gladness and joy for the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many among the peoples of the land became Jews, for the dread of the Jews had fallen on them.

When the copies of the decree, written in every language of the people in the Persian Empire leave the palace, Mordecai leaves the throne room of the king dressed as the Prime Minister of the Empire to rejoice with the people in the streets. In just 70 days, the Lord has transformed Mordecai from the rags of sackcloth to the riches of the king's robe, complete with garments and crown. A wave of joy and gladness will spread through the empire as the edict travels to all the people of the 127 provinces. However, the dread fills the hearts of the Persians who love the decree of Haman and hate the Jews,.

Persia's Preparation

Esther^{9:1} Now in the twelfth month (that is, the month Adar), on the thirteenth day when the king's command and edict were about to be executed, on the day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, it was turned to the contrary so that the Jews themselves gained the mastery over those who hated them. ²The Jews assembled in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm; and no one could stand before them, for the dread of them had fallen on all the peoples. ³ Even all the princes of the provinces, the satraps, the governors, and those who were doing the king's business assisted the Jews, because the dread of Mordecai had fallen on them.

Two hundred and fifty-four days later, on the 13th of Adar, the day designated by Haman for the annihilation of the Jews, the people of Persia prepare for a one-day war. It is a day of conflict caused by the two decrees issued under the hand of the same king. Who will win? Which decree will the government support? The Jews win and the government agencies support the Jews. In fear, many of the non-Jews join the Jews to fight against their own relatives who hate the Jewish people.

Mordecai's Reputation

Esther^{9:4} Indeed, Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces; for the man Mordecai became greater and greater.

The victory of the Jews on the 13th of Adar enhances the influence and reputation of Mordecai throughout the land.

Jew's Victory

Esther^{9:5} Thus the Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying; and they did what they pleased to those who hated them. ⁶ And in Susa the capital the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men, ⁷ and Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, ⁸ Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, ⁹ Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, and Vaizatha, ¹⁰ the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Jews' enemy; but they did not lay their hands on the plunder. ¹¹ On that day, the number of those who were killed in Susa the capital was reported to the king.

Five hundred die on the 13th of Adar in the city of Susa along with all ten sons of Haman, but for some unknown reason, the Jews there do not plunder the spoils of the dead. However, the report of the number of dead in Susa reaches the ear of the king. It is difficult to comprehend the king's state of mind on that day.

King's Report

Esther^{9:12} And the king said to Queen Esther, "The Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman in Susa the capital. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your petition? It shall even be granted you. And what is your further request? It shall also be done."

Xerxes has allowed Esther and Mordecai to devise the plan to thwart the work of Haman and now he engages Esther for further direction in the matter.

Haman's Family

Esther^{9:13} Then said Esther, "If it pleases the king, let tomorrow also be granted to the Jews who are in Susa to do according to the edict of today; and let Haman's ten sons be hanged on the gallows." ¹⁴ So the king commanded that it should be done so; and an edict was issued in Susa, and Haman's ten sons were hanged.

The ten sons of Haman are already dead but Esther wants them hanged on the gallows that their father built. Why? Although it is not a means of capital punishment in the Old Testament biblical law, hanging is a method of publicly ridiculing, shaming and desecrating the enemy. It is a form of scorn and public degradation and warning. ¹⁰ Throughout the Old Testament time and even hundreds of years after the life of Christ, the hanged man is considered an insult to God and therefore his land and property are defiled. ¹¹ Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, speaks of the hanging of the corpses of all executed criminals to show their disgrace. ¹² Esther's request falls within the realm of the common practice of the day for wicked enemies.

Jew's Victory Continues

Esther^{9:15} And the Jews who were in Susa assembled also on the fourteenth day of the month Adar and killed three hundred men in Susa, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder. ¹⁶ Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces assembled, to defend their lives and rid themselves of their enemies, and kill 75,000 of those who hated them; but they did not lay their hands on the plunder. ¹⁷ *This was done* on the thirteenth day of the month Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made it a day of feasting and rejoicing.

The killing does not stop on the 13th of Adar in the city of Susa. The next day, on the 14th, the Jews still have to defend themselves from their enemies. Three hundred more Persians die on that day. Throughout the empire, 75,000 die at the hands of the Jews, but again, the Jews fail to plunder the belongings of the dead. Everywhere in the empire, except Susa, the 14th of Adar is a day of rest, feasting and rejoicing.

Adar's 15th Day

Esther^{9:18} But the Jews who were in Susa assembled on the thirteenth and the fourteenth of the same month, and they rested on the fifteenth day and made it a day of feasting and rejoicing.

In the city of Susa, the day of rest, feasting and rejoicing must wait until the 15th of Adar because they are still fighting on the 14th.

Adar's 14th Day

Esther^{9:19} Therefore the Jews of the rural areas, who live in the rural towns, make the fourteenth day of the month Adar a holiday for rejoicing and feasting and sending portions of food to one another.

¹⁰ Gen. 40:19; Deut. 21:22; Josh. 8:29; 2 Sam. 4:12

¹¹ Gal. 3:13

¹² The Jewish Mishna, the oral commentary of the Jewish leadership established in the first century AD, prescribes the hanging of the corpses after being stoned.

The confusion of the two different days of rejoicing on the 14th and 15th causes a problem and Mordecai addresses the issue in the next verse.

Mordecai's Letter

Esther^{9:20} Then Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹ obliging them to celebrate the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same month, annually, ²² because on those days the Jews rid themselves of their enemies, and *it was a month* which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions *of food* to one another and gifts to the poor. ²³ Thus the Jews undertook what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. ²⁴ For Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the adversary of all the Jews, had schemed against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur, that is the lot, to disturb them and destroy them. ²⁵ But when it came to the king's attention, he commanded by letter that his wicked scheme which he had devised against the Jews, should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. ²⁶ Therefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. And because of the instructions in this letter, both what they had seen in this regard and what had happened to them, ²⁷ the Jews established and made a custom for themselves, and for their descendants, and for all those who allied themselves with them, so that they should not fail to celebrate these two days according to their regulation, and according to their appointed time annually. ²⁸ So these days were to be remembered and celebrated throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and these days of Purim were not to fail from among the Jews, or their memory fade from their descendants.

Mordecai orders the Jews to celebrate both the 14th and the 15th of Adar as a holiday called Purim. The apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees calls Purim the "day of Mordecai". The celebration occurs on the fourteenth day of Adar in villages and towns without walls and on the fifteenth day by those in fortified cities. No mention of any religious observance is connected with the day; however, in later periods, the Book of Esther is read in the synagogue on both days. It is the first Jewish holiday feast added to their calendar since the days of Moses. The Lord installs the feasts of the Mosaic period but Mordecai installs Purim. It is a man-made holiday. The Jews will add another man-made holiday or feast about three hundred years after Purim when Judas Maccabeus takes back the Temple from Antiochus Epiphanies in 164 BC.

Mordecai's Second Letter

Esther^{9:29} Then Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, with Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority to confirm this second letter about Purim. ³⁰ And he sent letters to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, namely, words of peace and truth, ³¹ to establish these days of Purim at their appointed times, just as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had established for them, and just as they had established for themselves and for their descendants with instructions for their times of fasting and their lamentations.

To give full authority to Mordecai's decree to the Jews to celebrate Purim, Esther sends a decree that all the Jews will follow Mordecai's instructions. Both Mordecai and Esther send the decrees without the stamp of the king's signet ring. Judaism is not the religion of the Persian Empire; therefore, the king will not take part in affirming the edict on the Jews. The purpose of Purim is to celebrate the grace of God that allows the great calamity against the Jews to be removed. In its place, a holiday of great giving of food and gifts to others

begins as a way to remember the tremendous distress that led the Jews to grieve to the point where the thought of food left them.

Esther's Confirmation

Esther^{9:32} And the command of Esther established these customs for Purim, and it was written in the book.

The event recorded in the life of Esther and Mordecai is so important that the Jews transcribe the story and keep it in their most memorable passages along with the Law and the Prophets.

King's Tax

Esther^{10:1} Now King Ahasuerus laid a tribute on the land and on the coastlands of the sea.

Why does Xerxes tax the land and the islands just off the coasts at this time? Have the two decrees and the two day civil war cost the country too much? Does the tax support the national celebration on Purim for a time? Does the tax endow Mordecai with his salary for life? No one knows. The record simply states that Xerxes collects a tax after the calamity. More than likely, it is a gift to Mordecai as seen in the next passage.

King's Accomplishments

Esther^{10:2} And all the accomplishments of his authority and strength, and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia?

The full record of the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia is long since gone, buried in oblivion while the sacred writing remains throughout the world. However, bits and pieces have been found and preserved. The Persian Tareekhs, which are compositions of this kind but not the Chronicles of the King, are numerous and important and give insight into the times.

Mordecai's Stature

Esther^{10:3} For Mordecai the Jew was second *only* to King Ahasuerus and great among the Jews, and in favor with the multitude of his kinsmen, one who sought the good of his people and one who spoke for the welfare of his whole nation.

The Jewish Targum is extravagant in its praise for Mordecai saying, "All the kings of the earth feared and trembled before him: he was as resplendent as the evening star among the stars; and was as bright as Aurora beaming forth in the morning; and he was chief of the kings."

Mordecai worked hard to maximize his power to promote the Jewish interest with the utmost of his power. He endeavored to ensure that their prosperity might be permanent. Here the Hebrew text ends but in the ancient Vulgate ten verses are added to this chapter, and in the Greek, six whole chapters are added so that the number of chapters in Esther totals sixteen.

Esther is the last historical book in the Old Testament. From this time to the birth of Christ the Bible student must seek the history among the apocryphal writers and other historians who recorded the Jewish history.

How do the lives of Xerxes, Mordecai and Esther end? In 465 BC, Xerxes is murdered by Artabanus of Persia, the commander of his royal bodyguard with the help of a eunuch, Aspamitres. Artabanus is the most powerful official in the Persian court. He places his seven sons in key positions and plans to dethrone the Achamenids Dynasty altogether. Greek historians give contradicting accounts of event. According to Ctesias (in Persica 20), Artabanus then accuses the Crown Prince Darius, Xerxes's son, of the murder and persuades another of Xerxes's sons, Artaxerxes I, son of Vashti, to avenge His father by killing Darius. But according to Aristotle, (in Politics 5.1311b), Artabanus kills Darius and then Xerxes. After Artaxerxes discovers the murder, he kills Artabanus and his seven sons. Although the two accounts disagree, Artabanus is responsible for the death of Xerxes. Artaxerxes' involvement places him on the throne in part because general Megabyzus leaves the side of Arabanus and joins Artaxerxes, probably saving the Achamenids from losing their control of the Persian throne.

A tomb is prepared for Xerxes in the area of modern-day Tehran (below right). It is similar to the burial place of his father, Darius Ist at Naqsh-e Rostam, Iran (below left).



Mordecai and Esther are buried together in Hamadan, Iran in the mausoleum pictured below.

