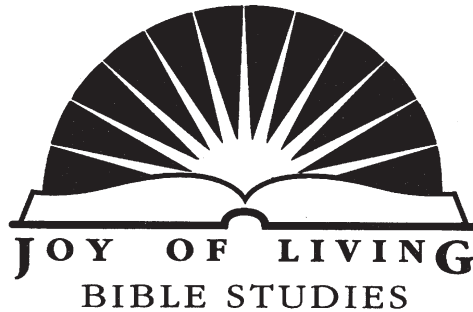


Esther

Lesson 1



Introduction to Esther

At first glance the book of Esther seems to be merely the amazing story of a Jewish woman who became queen of Persia, but a closer look reveals the story of God's faithfulness to His people and His ability to work providentially, behind the scenes, to accomplish His plan.

Throughout the Bible we see God using the common ordinary people and things of this world to accomplish his purposes. 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 says, "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him." In the book of Esther we see God using people's disobedience, anger, beauty, and sexual desire—as well as their obedience, humility and honor—to deliver His people.

God's Call and Promise

Genesis 11-35

Although the story related in the book of Esther took place in the fifth century B.C., it actually began over a thousand years earlier with one man in the city of Ur of the Chaldees. The descendants of Noah had spread out, multiplied and populated the earth and they had again abandoned the God who created them.

Yet God had not abandoned mankind. He called one man, Abram, and told him that if he would leave his country and go to a land God would show him, He would give Abram that land, make a great nation from his descendants, and bless all the world through him. (It would be through his descendants that the Savior of the world would come.) In faith Abram (later called Abraham) obeyed God. Abraham had a son, Isaac, to whom the promise was given and he in turn had a son, Jacob, to whom the promise was given.

From a Family to a Nation

Genesis 46—Exodus 18

Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel, had 12 sons. When Jacob was an old man he, his sons and their families (70 people in all) went into Egypt to escape starvation during a great famine. One of the

sons, Joseph, was already there and in great power. He was second only to the Pharaoh and because of this the family was well cared for.

However generations passed and the descendants of Israel grew in numbers. A new pharaoh arose and was fearful of this great number of foreigners living within the borders of his land. To protect himself and his country, he placed the Israelites in bondage where they remained for nearly 400 years.

As always God was faithful, and in His time He raised up a man named Moses to lead His people. With great and mighty miracles God delivered the Israelites from the Egyptians and led them to the land He had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

A Covenant Made and Broken

Exodus 19 — 1 Samuel 7

God made a covenant with the Israelites prior to their entering the Promised Land, the general area of the nation of Israel today. At Mount Sinai they agreed to serve the Lord and obey His commands. He gave them His Law and promised to bless them as long as they served Him. But even as God gave them His glorious Law, they were rebelling against Him and worshipping other gods. And so began the cycle of God's blessing, Israel's rebellion, God's disciplining, their repentance, God's deliverance and blessing again.

The Israelites were told to drive the heathen nations from the land. They were to make no covenants with them, but they disobeyed and were led into idolatry by them.

The Kingdom

1 Samuel 8 — 2 Chronicles 36

The people of Israel had the perfect government with the Lord Himself as King, and the Law of the Lord as the law of the land, yet they weren't satisfied. They wanted to be like the nations round about them. They wanted a man as their king. God granted their desire.

Saul, their first king, didn't fully obey the Lord so God gave the kingdom to David, a shepherd who loved the Lord. Although David made many mistakes, God said, "I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22). God promised David that one of his descendants would have a kingdom without end. He was referring

to Jesus Christ, the coming Savior, who would pay the price for the sins of the world and redeem mankind.

David's son Solomon inherited the kingdom from him, but because of Solomon's sin the kingdom was divided in the days of Solomon's son Rehoboam. The northern kingdom was known as Israel with Samaria as the capital. The southern kingdom was known as Judah with Jerusalem as the capital. As long as a godly king was on the throne the kingdoms tended to serve the Lord, but all too often there were ungodly kings and the people followed the practices of the heathen nations, which included burning their children as sacrifices to the demonic god, Molech.

In His love and compassion God sent prophets to warn them to turn from their wickedness, but with stiff necks and hard hearts they refused. So, after hundreds of years of rebellion and warnings the northern kingdom, Israel, was carried away into captivity (about 722 B.C.) by Assyria (see 2 Kings 17:6-18). As the people of Israel were taken away and settled in other lands, the king of Assyria brought people from other conquered nations and settled them in the land of Israel.

Except for brief periods of revival and despite seeing God's judgment fall upon the northern kingdom, the southern kingdom, Judah, continued in a path toward judgment and destruction, until finally a little over a hundred years later Judah was conquered by the Babylonians in 605 B.C. (see 2 Chronicles 36:6).

For Judah there were several deportations with opportunities for repentance in between, but they would not, as a nation, repent. We read in 2 Kings 24:13-14:

As the LORD had declared, Nebuchadnezzar removed all the treasures from the temple of the LORD and from the royal palace, and took away all the gold articles that Solomon king of Israel had made for the temple of the LORD. He carried into exile all Jerusalem: all the officers and fighting men, and all the craftsmen and artisans—a total of ten thousand. Only the poorest people of the land were left.

A Message of Hope – A Promise Made

But God does not abandon His people, nor does He leave them without hope. Even as the prophets were warning of judgment God had them prophesy a message of hope:

This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." (Jeremiah 29:10-14)

A Promise Fulfilled (Ezra — Nehemiah)

God was and is faithful. The Babylonians were conquered by the Persians and at the end of the 70 years prophesied by Jeremiah, Cyrus, king of Persia issued the following proclamation:

This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem." (Ezra 1:1-3)

And so in 537 B.C. many of the Jews returned to the land of promise under the leadership of Zerubbabel. As with any work of God, there was opposition, but God's promise held true—eventually the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt and sacrifice was restored. In about 458 B.C. God raised up a scribe named Ezra to lead another group back to Jerusalem. His desire was to teach God's law in Israel. Later Nehemiah, a Jew who served as cupbearer to the king of Persia, returned to Jerusalem in 445 B.C. with the king's permission and authority to rebuild the walls of the city.

The Book of Esther

The book of Esther takes place after the first group of Jews had been allowed to return to the Promised Land, but before Ezra and Nehemiah went to Jerusalem. Many Jewish people had returned out of captivity to their own land, Israel. Yet there were also many who stayed behind. They had been born in exile, established businesses, and were not inclined to uproot themselves to cross the desert and begin all over again in Israel, the land of their fathers. This story centers around one of these families. Mordecai was a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin whose family had been deported from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. He lived in the Persian capital of Susa, and raised his younger cousin, Esther, whose parents had died.

The book is named after its main character, Esther, a name that is derived from the Persian word for "star." (Esther's Hebrew name was Hadassah, which means "myrtle."¹) The exact time when the book was written and who its author was are not known. It was written sometime after the death of King Xerxes of Persia, who reigned from 486-465 B.C.² The author, who showed an intimate knowledge of the royal palace in Susa and of the events of Xerxes' reign, was probably a Jew who lived in Persia at the time of these narrated events. He no doubt had access to the official chronicle of the kings of Media and Persia (see Esther 2:23; 6:1; 10:2).

1. Kenneth Barker, editor. *The NIV Study Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985. See note on Esther 2:7.

2. Cyrus, who had issued the edict allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem, was the chief ruler of Persia with Darius serving under him, and both began their reigns in 539 B.C.. Darius' son, Xerxes, was king during the time of Esther. The book of Esther calls him Ahasuerus, a variant of Xerxes' Persian name.

Although the writer of this book did not use the name of God, God was not to be eliminated from this story! Matthew Henry, the great Bible commentator says of this book, “Though the name of God be not in it, the finger of God is.”¹ This book demonstrates that God has a part in all of the events of human life.

Henrietta Mears wrote, “Esther is like Joseph and David. God had each one hidden away for His purpose. When the day came, He brought them to the front to work out His plan. God hid Joseph away in a dungeon in Egypt but when He was ready, He placed him in the position of prime minister of that country. God always has someone in reserve to fulfill His purposes. Sometimes it is a man like Joseph, or Moses. Sometimes it is a woman like Hannah, or Esther, or Mary.”² Just as Esther had “come to royal position for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14), there are times in which God has planned to use you.

The book of Esther demonstrates God’s preservation power and His providence for His people. God not only created the world, but He holds it together, “sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Hebrews 1:3). “In him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). The world would come unglued if it were not for God. And in God’s providence, He directs all things, both good and evil, toward His cause—which means that He will have the final victory! “His kingdom rules over all” (Psalm 103:19). Yes, God is at the steering wheel of this universe. You need not fear what the ultimate destination is, for with God in control we know that all will end well! (See Romans 8:28.)

We do not know what is around the corner, but God by His providence is leading. Every day is a new adventure for those who have faith in Jesus Christ. He allows enemies and trouble to come into our lives, but He also gives us His peace, His guidance, and life to the full (see John 10:10; 14:27).

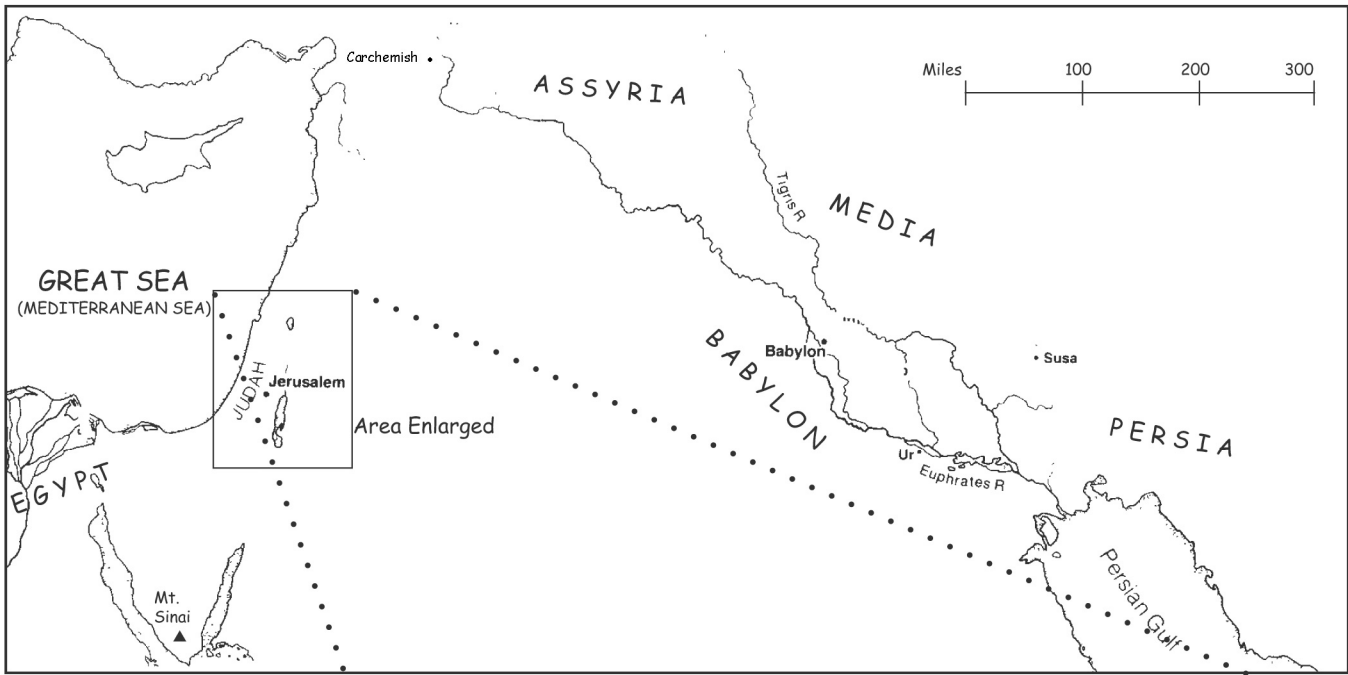
A Daily Appointment with God

Make a daily appointment with God. Find a quiet spot. Take your Bible, pencil or pen and your lesson with you. If you have a busy phone, you may have to remove it from the hook, turn off the ringer or hide the phone under a blanket to muffle the ringing! Remember how very important your appointment with God is and *make time to be with Him daily*. Ask yourself the following things:

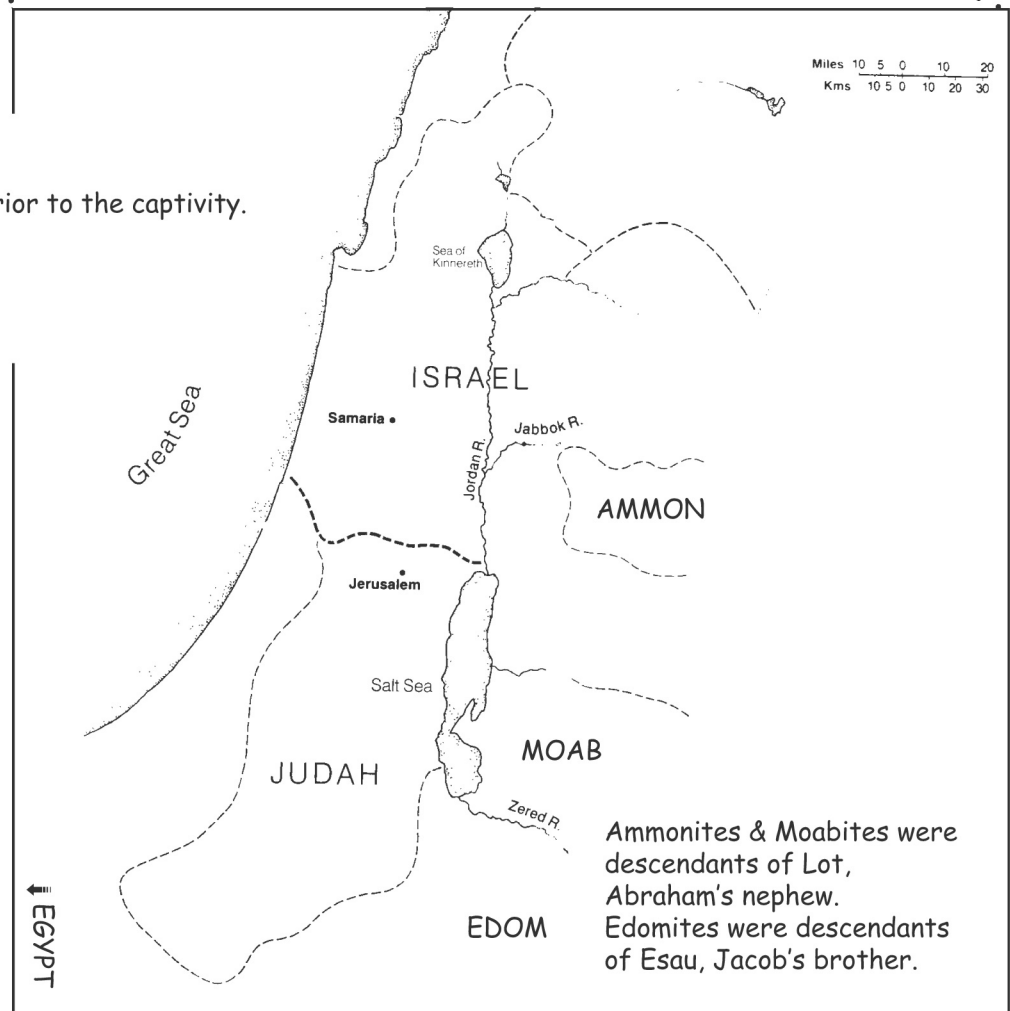
1. How much time will I spend with the Lord each day?
2. What do I need to put aside in order to spend this time with the Lord? (Examples: sleep, television, casual telephone conversations, window shopping, etc. Each person will have to decide what his or her priorities are and what can be removed from the daily schedule to make time to spend with God.)
3. What is the *best time* for my appointment with God?
4. Where is the *quietest* place for me to pray and study?
5. Do I really want to spend time with God? (If your last answer is “yes,” God will bless you as you work out the time. If your last answer is “no,” pray that God will give you a desire, a hunger to spend this time with Him. He will do this for you!)

1. *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*. (1706) Public domain.
 2. Henrietta C. Mears. *What the Bible Is All About*. (Ventura: Regal, 1997) 164.

Where Esther took place



Division of the Kingdom prior to the captivity.
 (Northern Kingdom: Israel
 Southern Kingdom: Judah)



Study Questions

Before you begin your study this week:

- ☞ Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- ☞ Use only the Bible for your answers.
- ☞ Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- ☞ Answer the “Challenge” questions if you have the time and want to do them.
- ☞ Share your answers to the “Personal” questions with the class only if you want to share them.

First Day: Read the Introduction to Esther.

1. What meaningful or new thought did you find in the Introduction to Esther, or from your teacher’s lecture? What personal application did you choose to apply to your life?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down, carry it with you, tack it to your bulletin board, on the dashboard of your car, etc. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its “address” (reference of where it is found in the Bible).

Second Day: Read Esther 1, concentrating on verses 1-4.

1. Who was king of the Persian Empire at this time, and over what area did he rule? What city did he rule from at this time? (Esther 1:1-2) Find this city on the map on page 8.

2. What event did the king host and who attended? (Esther 1:3)

3. How long did this event last and what was its purpose? (Esther 1:4)

4. Challenge: The author begins to set the scene for the story of Esther to unfold. From his description, how would you summarize the condition of the Persian Empire and the outlook of its king at this time? How does this reflect the viewpoint of many world leaders today?

5. The king of the Persian Empire held feasts and gloried in his own majesty, apparently without any thought of the one true God and His majesty. Although most of Israel was still in exile and even those who had returned to the Promised Land were still subjects of the Persian Empire, God’s loving hand was upon His people. What do you learn about God’s care for His people in the following verses?

Ezekiel 34:11-12

John 10:14-15

Philippians 4:19

6. Personal: Do you ever look at the state of the world around you and wonder if God has forgotten His people, or if He has forgotten *you*? How do the verses in question 5 help you?

Third Day: Review Esther 1, concentrating on verses 5-9.

1. After the 180-day banquet, what new event did the king host, for whom, and how long did it last? (Esther 1:5)

2. How does the writer describe the setting for this banquet? (Esther 1:6-7)

3. The normal Persian custom was that whenever the king drank, everyone drank, and the Persian court was noted for excessive drinking.¹ What command did the king give regarding the guests? (Esther 1:8)

4. What related event was held at the same time as the king's banquet? (Esther 1:9)

5. Challenge: The author of this book paints a beautiful and luxurious picture of the setting for the king and queen's banquets. What an honor it must have been to be invited, and how they must have enjoyed attending. Read Matthew 22:2 and Revelation 19:5-9. How do these Scriptures describe the banquet that God will someday give for His people?

6. Personal: Will you be one of the great multitude at the wedding supper of the Lamb—given by God the Father for His Son, Jesus Christ? You can be assured of a place at the table by accepting Jesus' payment for your sin. Read John 3:16-18.

Fourth Day: Review Esther 1, concentrating on verses 10-12.

1. How long had this banquet been going on, and what was the king's condition? (Esther 1:10a)

2. a. What did the king command his servants to do? (Esther 1:10b-11a)

1. F.F. Bruce, editor. *The International Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 513.

- b. Why did the king issue this command? (Esther 1:11b)

3. How did Queen Vashti respond? (Esther 1:12a)

4. How did the king react to the queen's disobedience? (Esther 1:12b)

5. No reason is given for Vashti's refusal. If the king had been in full control of himself, rather than under the influence of alcohol, he might not have made this request. What do the following verses say is the result of consuming too much alcohol?
Proverbs 20:1

Proverbs 23:29-32

Proverbs 31:4-5

6. Personal: Have you ever consumed so much alcohol or another substance that you were under its control? What does Ephesians 5:18 say is the believer's alternative to being influenced by alcohol or other substances? If substance abuse is an ongoing problem for you, why not pray and ask God to take away the desire for it and to fill you with His Spirit. Read Luke 11:13.

Fifth Day: Review Esther 1, concentrating on verses 13-18.

1. What did the king do as he considered how to deal with Queen Vashti's disobedience? (Esther 1:13-15)

2. How did one of the wise men analyze the situation? (Esther 1:16-18)

3. Challenge: Read Ephesians 5:21-31. What principles are to govern the relationship between a Christian husband and a Christian wife? How do the principles balance each other? What might result if only one principle is emphasized to the exclusion of the other?

4. Personal: If you are married, do you live by the principles found in Ephesians 5:21-31? If this is difficult for you, or you are not sure how to apply these principles to your marriage, pray and ask God to give you His wisdom and power to live as He directs you. Read James 1:5.

Sixth Day: Review Esther 1, concentrating on verses 19-22.

1. a. What solution did Memucan propose in Esther 1:19?
- b. Challenge: How did the suggested punishment correspond to Vashti's offense?
2. What did he believe would be the result of this solution? (Esther 1:20)
3. Did the king decide to follow Memucan's advice? What did he do? (Esther 1:21-22)
4. King Xerxes was an all-powerful monarch over his empire. To all appearances he was in complete control of his destiny and that of Queen Vashti. Yet God is the One actually in control, and He used this situation to make way for Esther to become queen. What do you learn about this in the following Scriptures?
- 1 Samuel 2:7-8
- Daniel 2:21
- Romans 13:1
- Colossians 1:16
5. Personal: What is your attitude towards life? You can live as if you, yourself, are in control. You can live in fear because you know you are not in control and you don't think anyone else is, either. Or you can rest in the truth that God is in control of everything. Read Romans 8:28. How will you choose to live?
6. What verse did you choose to memorize this week? Share it with your group if you wish.