

ESTHER

MAIN CHARACTERS

- King Ahasuerus, ruler of the Persian Empire
- Mordecai, a Jew living in Susa, the winter capital of the Persian Empire [Whenever the name of Mordecai is spoken, say, "Blessed be Mordecai."]
- Esther (Hadassah), the niece of Mordecai
- Haman, advisor to King Ahasuerus [Whenever the name of Haman is spoken, make noise and drown out the name]

CHAPTER 1

This happened in the days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in the citadel of Susa. He gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers lasting for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. Furthermore, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for the women in the palace of King Ahasuerus.

On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded his servants, to bring Queen Vashti before him, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him.

Then the king consulted the sages who knew the laws: "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus?" Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath! If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike."

This advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memucan proposed; he sent letters to all the royal provinces, declaring that every man should be master in his own house.

CHAPTER 2

Then the king's servants said, "Let beautiful young women be sought out for the king. And let the king appoint commissioners to gather the beautiful young women. And let the girl who pleases the king most be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.

Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai. Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother. So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, Esther also was taken into the king's palace. Esther did not reveal her people or kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to tell. Every day Mordecai would walk around in front of the court, to learn how Esther was. The king loved Esther more than all the other women, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. Esther had not revealed her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had charged her; for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. In those days, two of the king's servants became angry and conspired to assassinate King Ahasuerus. But the matter came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. When the affair was investigated and found to be so, both the men were hanged on the gallows. It was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

CHAPTER 3

After these things King Ahasuerus promoted his advisor Haman and set his seat above all the officials. And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down to Haman; for the king had so commanded. But Mordecai did not bow down to Haman. Then the king's servants said to Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would avail; for he had told them that he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down to him, Haman was infuriated. But he thought it beneath him to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, having been told who Mordecai's people were, Haman plotted to destroy all the Jews throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction." So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the enemy of the Jews. The king said to Haman, "Do with them as it seems good to you."

Then the king's secretaries were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written. Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation, calling on all the peoples to be ready for that day. The couriers went quickly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

CHAPTER 4

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry. In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

When Esther's maids came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them. Then Esther called for one of the king's servants, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. Mordecai gave him a copy of the written decree for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him for her people.

The servant went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law — all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live." When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

CHAPTER 5

On the third day, Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, opposite the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne inside the palace opposite the entrance to the palace. As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won his favor and he held out to her the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the top of the scepter. The king said to her, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom." Then Esther said, "If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to a banquet that I have prepared for the king." Then the king said, "Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther desires." So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared. While they were drinking wine, the king said to Esther, "What is your petition? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." Then Esther said, "This is my petition and request: If I have won the king's favor, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the

banquet that I will prepare for them, and then I will do as the king has said."

Haman went out that day happy and in good spirits. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, and observed that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was infuriated with Mordecai; nevertheless Haman restrained himself and went home. Then he sent and called for his friends and his wife Zeresh, and Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the ministers of the king. Haman added, "Even Queen Esther let no one but myself come with the king to the banquet that she prepared. Tomorrow also I am invited by her, together with the king. Yet all this does me no good so long as I see the Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate." Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged on it; then go with the king to the banquet in good spirits." This advice pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.

CHAPTER 6

That night the king could not sleep, and he gave orders to bring the book of records, the annals, and they were read to the king. It was found written how Mordecai had told about two of the king's servants, who had conspired to assassinate King Ahasuerus. Then the king said, "What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" The king's servants who attended him said, "Nothing has been done for him." The king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for him. So the king's servants told him, "Haman is there, standing in the court." The king said, "Let him come in." So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?" Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king wish to honor more than me?" So Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king wishes to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and a horse that the king has ridden, with a royal crown on its head. Let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials; let him robe the man whom the king wishes to honor, and let him conduct the man on horseback through the open square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall it be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor.'" Then the king said to Haman, "Quickly, take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to the Jew Mordecai who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned." So Haman took the robes and the horse and robed Mordecai and led him riding through the open square of the city, proclaiming, "Thus shall it be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor." Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate, but Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered. When Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him, his advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him."

While they were still talking with him, the king's servants arrived and hurried Haman off to the banquet that Esther had prepared.

CHAPTER 7

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me — that is my petition — and the lives of my people — that is my request. ⁴For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king." Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. The king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king had determined to destroy him. When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining; and the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. Then one of the servants in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

CHAPTER 8

On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews; and Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. Then the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. So Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Then Esther spoke again to the king; she fell at his feet, weeping and pleading with him to avert the evil design of Haman and the plot that he had devised against the Jews. The king held out the golden scepter to Esther, and Esther rose and stood before the king. She said, "If it pleases the king, and if I have won his favor, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I have his approval, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman which he wrote giving orders to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming on my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?" Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to the Jew Mordecai, "See, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he plotted to lay hands on the Jews. You may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring; for an edict written in the

name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked."

An edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded, to the Jews and to the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, one hundred twenty-seven provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. He wrote letters in the name of King Ahasuerus, sealed them with the king's ring, and sent them by mounted couriers riding on fast steeds bred from the royal herd. By these letters the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to assemble and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them.

Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king, wearing royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple, while the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. For the Jews there was light and gladness, joy and honor. In every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict came, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a festival and a holiday.

PURIM: A festival in the Jewish liturgical calendar falling on the fourteenth day of the month of ADAR, which commemorates the Jews' deliverance from HAMAN's plot through the actions of Esther and Mordecai. The name PURIM comes from the Babylonian word for "lots" or "fate". Lots were cast to determine the date of the attack. The celebration includes reading the story in the synagogue, gifts of charity to the poor, exchanges of food, and an abundant meal. It is a joyous and playful occasion with a carnival-like ambience. Celebrants dress in costume, engage in role-playing, and sound noisemakers that the mention of Haman's name. This year (2019), Purim begins on Wednesday, March 20, and ends on Thursday, March 21.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. What was your favorite part of the story?
2. What surprised you most in the story?
3. What seemed ridiculous about the story?
4. Who are the villains and who are the heroes in the story?
5. Who are the people you admire most in the story? Why?
6. How did good win out over evil?
7. What important lessons does the story teach?
8. What kind of evil happens in the world today? What happens if Christians are silent about this evil?
9. How can Christians speak out against evil?