

***GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY  
IN A SECULAR SOCIETY***

***Notes from a series of Bible Studies  
on the Book of Esther***

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# 1. POWER AND PRIDE

## *Esther 1*

This series of Bible studies is not meant to be an in-depth study of the *Book of Esther*; rather simply a taster and overview of each chapter.

The events recorded in the *Book of Esther* occurred in the land of Persia known today as Iran. These events took place in the historic period between the years 486-465 BC. The story centres around the preservation of the Jewish race, then under captivity in the Persian Empire.

Its purpose is to show God's almighty deliverance and faithfulness to His covenant promise to the Jews. Ever since the Fall of man in the Garden of Eden, Satan has attempted to thwart the purposes of God. Here in this book we have an amazing example of the power of God to overcome Satan's evil and work. God's sovereignty is demonstrated for His glory even in a pagan, secular society.

This book is a great encouragement because it proves beyond doubt that God can work in any type of situation. God can work anywhere and everywhere, in any society, culture, tribe or nation.

Another overall lesson this book teaches us is that God is still at work, even though He seems to be hidden. This book does not mention God's name, and consequently people question whether it should be in the Bible. While it does not mention God by name, it teaches us He is ordering His providence behind the scenes. He can use even a secular king and work through a secular society to accomplish His purposes.

At such a time, this book should bring us to realise that even unpredictable world leaders, and those ruling over oppressive regimes, are not beyond the permissive, restraining will of God.

## *God's Sovereignty in a Secular Society*

As we go through the *Book of Esther* it is my intention to attempt to draw some relevant lessons for today.

### **Power and pride produce the evils of attention seeking, arrogance and aggression**

#### **a. Attention seeking**

Every day for 180 days the King had had praise heaped upon him. As he showed the people the splendour of his majesty, each day his pride was being watered. He could afford to be generous and he laid on an extravagant display both to impress and for which to be praised. Showering praise on an attention-seeking person simply waters their pride and sense of power.

This was one of the objectives of recording the event in the first chapter of the *Book of Esther*. We so easily fall into the trap of wanting to show off. Archaeologists discovered a foundation stone of a palace dating to the time of Ahasuerus. Carved upon it was an inscription confirming the King's arrogance and pride:

'I am Xerxes [Ahasuerus] the great king, the only king, the king of all countries which speak all kinds of languages, the king of this entire and far reaching earth, the son of King Darius.'

Historians tell us that the event recorded in this first chapter was held with a dual purpose: to show off the wealth of his kingdom, and to make military plans with his officials to attack Greece. Some years before, his father had invaded Greece and been shamefully defeated. His son wanted revenge, and in between the accounts in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 he attacked Greece. He intended to conquer Europe but was again defeated.

*'Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall'*  
*Proverbs 16.18.*

#### **b. Arrogance**

The exhibition culminated in a seven day feast, at the end of which

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Ahasuerus was *'merry with wine'* (verse 10). Note this irony – merry with wine and yet about to make behave in an obnoxious manner. Surrounded by drunken officials he decided to call for his beautiful wife to show her off before the men. He was not content with proving he was the richest man on the planet; he also wanted to prove he had the most beautiful wife.

This command was arrogant, foolish and totally uncaring and disrespectful of his wife. In the culture of his day it was an extremely shocking command. The features of women were generally completely covered before men and only visible to their husbands. To be paraded before men in such a way would have been deeply hurtful and humiliating for Queen Vashti.

The King was drunk: he was master of his empire but not master of himself. Never allow yourself to drink to the extent that it affects your judgment. In other words if you do drink, moderation is most certainly required. If you can not drink moderately, do not drink at all!

He was demanding: as he showed off before his guests, he had no regard for the feelings of his wife – his ego must be fed at all costs. This reminds us that a husband must never use his wife as a tool to promote his ego. Sometimes in company husbands treat their wives aggressively as a sign of supposed power. Their wives become a tool to advance their so-called manliness. I have witnessed this on occasions, especially when men are affected by drink.

### **c. Aggression**

Queen Vashti refused his demands and the King was furious. His pride was hurt; he felt humiliated in front of his officials. Here we are reminded how vulnerable powerful men really are. One action reduces this man to lose control and fly off into a violent rage; his pride 'bubble' was truly burst.

Here we are reminded of the problem of sinful anger.

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*'He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city' Proverbs 16.32.*

*A quick-tempered man acts foolishly, and a man of wicked intentions is hated' Proverbs 14.17.*

*A fool's wrath is known at once, but a prudent man covers shame' Proverbs 12.16.*

This raises an issue: why is it when we are disobeyed we often get angry, and yet fail to understand why a holy God should have righteous anger when we disobey Him?

In God's order submission to one's husband was never meant to bring humiliation on the wife in such a manner. Vashti was right to refuse such a request. The exact reason Vashti refused the king we are not told; we have no evidence that she believed in God. However there is a principle here.

*'Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord' Colossians 3.18.*

Among the men at the party there was fear! Vashti was an icon in society; her action could influence other ladies. Remember what an influence Diana, the Princess of Wales, had upon fashion and the role of women.

To make matters worse, the King's counsellors advised him to banish his wife and to make a law to ensure wives honoured their husbands. When counsel is given to protect the image and ego of the person being served, it is false counsel. We have to understand that if we ask for advice, we should expect an honest opinion to be challenging. The Word of God says, *'Faithful are the wounds of a friend' (Proverbs 27.6).*

Here it was negative, protective counsel that each man should be master in his own house. Legislation will never ensure that wives honour their husbands. The Word of God teaches us that it is not

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legislation but love which will cause wives to respect their husbands. Aggression may force submission, obedience and fear, but will never force respect. See *Ephesians 5*.

### **Conclusion**

It is easy to be overwhelmed when considering powerful and wealthy people, yet there is a positive manner in which we can put worldly power and wealth in its right perspective.

Our Saviour and King, Jesus Christ, has dominion, not just from Egypt to India, but over every nation! Every knee shall ultimately bow to Him.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has a throne in Glory. Our Saviour has His own special banquets: the Lord's Supper, and the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Our heavenly King has immeasurable wealth and unsearchable riches. Eternity will never exhaust the riches of Jesus Christ. One hundred and eighty days was sufficient to assess King Ahasuerus's wealth.



## 2. MAINTAINING DIGNITY IN A DECADENT WORLD

### *Esther 2*

Four years passed between the deposing of Vashti as queen, and the events recorded in this chapter.

*‘...in the third year of his reign he made a feast for all his officials and servants—the powers of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the princes of the provinces being before him’ Esther 1.3.*

*‘So Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign’ Esther 2.16.*

According to the historians the King had suffered a heavy defeat in Greece. He now returned to Shushan, his image and reputation having been severely damaged. Historians tell us that he bitterly regretted the way in which he taken the advice of his sycophantic counsellors, showing the pathetic yet proud, arrogant manner in which he had rejected Vashti.

In response to this situation his counsellors recommend a project which will keep the King occupied. At the same time they again attempted to fulfil his lust and pride. His pride must be watered in another way.

The Bible is the most truthful book ever written, and that ever will be written; it portrays life as it really is. What was happening here was not a beauty contest as some might refer to it. It was rather the abuse of beauty by a sinful, proud and arrogant man.

The teenage girls and women were taken by the officers (v2, v3, v8, v16). They had no choice in the matter.

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*'So it was, when the king's command and decree were heard, and when many young women were gathered at Shushan the citadel, under the custody of Hegai, that Esther also was taken to the king's palace, into the care of Hegai the custodian of the women' Esther 2.8.*

Imagine the scene in some households: marriage perhaps planned to a young man in the village, but now officers arrive and take the girl off to Shushan. Historians tell us that some beautiful girls, facing the prospect of being taken, married quickly. No doubt some saw it as a great opportunity; some parents may have seen it as a great honour. 'Our daughter is so beautiful she has been taken to the King!'

The point to remember is what happened to these girls not in the short term but in the long term. Having had their beauty preparations for a set time they went into the King. They had no choice in the matter, and they had to do exactly as the King required. The next morning, if the King did not take great delight in them, they were taken off to another house. They were now classified for life as one of the King's concubines. For the rest of their lives they were imprisoned, not released and allowed to rebuild their lives. Rather, they were simply confined in a harem in readiness for a possible call from the King at a later date.

God does not mean us to take this account and spiritualise sin – God never condones evil. But He does mean us to learn that He is sovereign over all – God can overrule evil so that it turns out for good. Nowhere do we read that Mordecai pushed Esther forward into this situation. Rather, as a man of God, Mordecai helped Esther to maintain a godly dignity in a decadent world. We read he advised her not to reveal her people or family. Do not reveal what is not required of you – be discreet. Matthew Henry said:

*'All truths are not to be spoken at all times, though an untruth is not to be spoken at any time.'*

## *Maintainint Dignity in a Decadent World*

As the story unfolds we know that Mordecai's advice was ordained of God. This was simply another piece in the plan in God's sovereignty in a secular society.

Another indication as to Mordecai's concern for Esther in the situation is revealed for us in verse 11.

*'And every day Mordecai paced in front of the court of the women's quarters, to learn of Esther's welfare and what was happening to her.'*

Neither Mordecai nor Esther wilfully exposed themselves to such a situation, but having been placed in it they do respond wisely. One of the lessons here is learning how to respond in a way which is ultimately going to bring honour to God. We live in an imperfect world surrounded by unbelievers; how can we be God's people in murky waters?

We have to move from the romanticism to reality. Mordecai and Esther were believers in a sovereign God, which the latter part of Chapter 4 proves. Esther understood how she could best be a witness for God in a situation beyond her control.

So having attempted to take an honest look at the reality of her position in its context, let us consider the testimony of both Esther and Mordecai.

### **Esther**

True beauty is not only to do with the physical but also the person. The Bible tells us Esther was *'lovely and beautiful'* (verse 7) – beautiful in form and lovely to look at. It is said that Esther was considered in her time to be the most beautiful woman in the world. Josephus, the Jewish historian, says she surpassed women in beauty in all the habitable world. In addition to this the chapter teaches us Esther had a pleasing personality.

*'Now the young woman pleased him, and she obtained his*

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*favour; so he readily gave beauty preparations to her, besides her allowance. Then seven choice maidservants were provided for her from the king's palace, and he moved her and her maidservants to the best place in the house of the women' Esther 2.9.*

God gave her a submissive and obedient spirit, and understanding for the need for discretion.

*'Esther had not revealed her people or family, for Mordecai had charged her not to reveal it' Esther 2.10.*

*'Now Esther had not revealed her family and her people, just as Mordecai had charged her, for Esther obeyed the command of Mordecai as when she was brought up by him' Esther 2.20.*

She possessed wisdom.

*'Now when the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his daughter, to go in to the king, she requested nothing but what Hegai the king's eunuch, the custodian of the women, advised. And Esther obtained favour in the sight of all who saw her' Esther 2.15.*

The Bible tells us how to be truly beautiful.

*'...rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God' 1 Peter 3.4.*

Having been placed in the situation Esther took it seriously. She maintained her dignity in a decadent world through discreet behaviour. When given the opportunity to adorn herself with anything she desired, she showed discretion. She was evidently humble and willing to take advice; she was respected (see verse 15).

God was with Esther in the midst of a very difficult and testing state of affairs. Remember how Daniel and his friends behaved in a similarly difficult plight.

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When Esther went into the King she evidently took the matter wholeheartedly, intending a permanent relationship. She was placed in this predicament, but being in it she entered into it with the intention of marriage to the King. The manner of this night is an exception – the exception does not prove the rule in our own lives.

The Bible says, *‘The king loved Esther more than all the other women’* (*Esther 2 v 17*). This word ‘loved’ here is not referring just to a physical relationship – the King had experienced plenty of those. Here the word has to do with emotion, the inner being. There was something different in this relationship. Esther obtained grace and favour because the King’s heart was touched. Esther was not a number, she was a person, and the King wanted a relationship with a person. Esther was lovely and beautiful, both physically and personally, and she entered this relationship as a person.

Now God, in the mystery of His providence, used the beauty of Esther to ensure she would come to the kingdom for such a time as this. Her Hebrew name Hadassah, meaning ‘divine generosity’, in a way confirms the sovereignty of God in her life. God knew what the future held, and He knew why Esther was to be queen. An orphaned Jewish young lady became queen of the greatest empire in the world. A proud king was smitten by love under the sovereign, permissive will of God Who controls the hearts of all men. God, in His mysterious providence, ensured the future safety of His covenant people.

### **Mordecai**

There are two particular characteristics of this man which shine in this chapter. The first is:

#### **a. Care**

He took Esther when she was orphaned and looked after her like his own daughter. He obviously took great care over her and Esther trusted him. This is seen in the way in which she heeded and respect-

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ed his advice. Once in the palace the position could have gone to her head, but she loved and respected Mordecai. She knew he cared for her. Mordecai had brought Esther up to be true to God whatever the circumstances. Esther was now in the palace but Mordecai continued to care.

*'And every day Mordecai paced in front of the court of the women's quarters, to learn of Esther's welfare and what was happening to her' Esther 2.11.*

The lesson for us is that when our children leave home our concern for their welfare should not stop.

### **b. Loyalty**

*'In those days, while Mordecai sat within the king's gate, two of the king's eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, doorkeepers, became furious and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. So the matter became known to Mordecai, who told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name. And when an inquiry was made into the matter, it was confirmed, and both were hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king' Esther 2.21-23.*

Mordecai had a privileged position to sit within the king's gate. Here justice was dispensed and all the news was given and discussed. While sitting there Mordecai overheard the threats and plans for an assassination attempt by two of the king's eunuchs. Mordecai conveyed this information to Esther, who in turn, in Mordecai's name, informed the king. To gain extra favour as the king's new bride Esther could easily have taken the credit for this revelation, but once again we see her using discretion and in humility, being faithful to Mordecai.

President Reagan kept a small plaque on his desk which said: 'There is no limit to what a man can do or where he can go if he does not mind who gets the credit.' Verse 23 is significant to the events later on and confirm that as the hymn writer says,

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*My life's minutest circumstance*

*Is subject to His eye.*

*Charles Wesley, 1707-88*

*Augustus M Toplady, 1740-78*

### **Conclusion**

It is easy to sit in judgment when we consider professing Christians in high places appearing to compromise, but at the same we, in a much smaller sphere, often fail ourselves when faced with far less pressure.

Mordecai and Esther were captives in Persia. They served God in a pagan land. I believe Esther, in the fear of the Lord, prepared herself as a bride prepared herself for her husband. In a difficult situation her attitude was crucial. Was pride or humility going to win the day?

It is sometimes difficult for us to comprehend how it is that God works in the world. Here is God overruling in circumstances where an evil empire is using an evil system. In fact, here is a case which shows how God goes before and is sorting out tomorrow's problems today. He is already putting His people in place to deal with the problems of the future.

Remember the case of Joseph.

*'He sent a man before them—Joseph—who was sold as a slave'*  
*Psalms 105.17.*

Remember, God is eternally committed to the spiritual security and welfare of His people.



### 3. THE HEART OF HATRED IN HAMAN

#### *Esther 3*

When interpreting Scripture, always remember the overall picture in each part of Scripture has to be interpreted in harmony with the whole. For example, in interior design this principle can be seen practically when choosing styles and colours. How does this item fit in with the overall scheme; what does it contribute to the whole? To get the significance of what is going on in this chapter we need to investigate how it fits in with the greater overall theme of Scripture.

God created the heavens and the earth, man and woman and all creatures. Everything was perfect and working in harmony together. Then came the Fall of man, leading to broken communion with God. Following this event comes God's amazing and gracious promise in *Genesis 3.15*.

*'And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.'*

Here God revealed His will and the battle lines were drawn between God and Satan. Through Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets, God revealed more and more of this promise. Finally the promise came to its fulfilment in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament could be viewed as God, in His amazing sovereignty, working out His perfect will, while Satan continually attempted to stop the fulfilment of God's promise.

The great picture of both Old and New Testament times is of God redeeming a people to Himself, redeeming them through Jesus Christ the Lord, and His Church growing, the gates of hell not prevailing against it despite Satan's continual, desperate attempts to do so.

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We live in a battlefield today between the power of God and the power of Satan. This chapter is not just a story about a proud and hateful man; it is an account of how Satan makes a horrible, yet futile, attempt to overthrow God's sovereign purposes. Remember, each part of Scripture has to be interpreted in harmony with the whole. How does it fit in with the overall picture? The overall picture of this chapter is in the context of a conflict between Satan and God. We consider Chapter 3 with this principle in mind.

### **The historic background**

*'After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and set his seat above all the princes who were with him' Esther 3.1.*

Haman was a descendent of King Agag, king of the Amalekites. Amalek was a grandson of Esau. Esau's descendants were traditional enemies of Israel. The Amalekites attacked the children of Israel as they were travelling in the wilderness. See *Exodus 17.8-15* and *Deuteronomy 25.17-19*.

Later King Saul failed to carry out God's command regarding the destruction of the Amalekites, and in this chapter the effect is seen.

*'Thus says the Lord of hosts: "I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he ambushed him on the way when he came up from Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey"... But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were unwilling to utterly destroy them. But everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed' 1 Samuel 15.2-3, 9.*

Haman would have grown up to hate the Jews.

## *The Heart of Hatred in Haman*

### **Haman**

Satan put his man, Haman, in position. Haman was favoured by the king and promoted. It would appear, as we learn more of Haman, this appointment had little to do with ability. It had to do with promoting a person who knew how to gain favour with the King – a ‘yes man’.

*‘So Haman came in, and the king asked him, “What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honour?” Now Haman thought in his heart, “Whom would the king delight to honour more than me?”’ Esther 6.6.*

It is evident that the King had not done his homework but had fallen for a man who made him feel important. Haman was a proud man, and promoting such a proud man to a position of authority always leads to problems.

The King insisted by law that Haman was worshipped. This is another sign of the way in which Haman’s was a forced promotion. In the culture of the day someone in that position who had earned respect would have been shown honour without needing a command to enforce it. Evidently, according to historians, Haman also had a statue made of himself to which people should bow.

So we can begin to get a picture of what was going on here. A man who was an enemy of the Jews and of God demanded to be worshipped and respected like a god. In such circumstances should Mordecai bow?

### **Mordecai**

God had His man already in position.

*‘And all the king’s servants who were within the king’s gate bowed and paid homage to Haman, for so the king had commanded concerning him’ Esther 3.2a.*

Mordecai equally would realise, being a man of God, that there was

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a biblical principle at stake here. It is evident that for Mordecai the issue was a major, no-compromise matter. He could not in all conscience, as a Jew believing in God, bow down to Haman.

*'But Mordecai would not bow or pay homage. Then the king's servants who were within the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?" Now it happened, when they spoke to him daily and he would not listen to them, that they told it to Haman, to see whether Mordecai's words would stand; for Mordecai had told them that he was a Jew' Esther 3.2b-4.*

His colleagues could not understand his position and no doubt tried to persuade him to 'loosen up,' and just pretend to obey this law. Here was a man who was prepared to stand alone for God.

Mordecai would not have realised how ferocious the attack would be from Haman because of his actions. Imagine how awful Mordecai must have felt when he realised the cost of his actions! No wonder he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. God in mercy often hides the future consequences of faithfulness.

### **Pride and hatred**

Pride reveals the true heart of fallen human nature.

*'When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow or pay him homage, Haman was filled with wrath. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him of the people of Mordecai. Instead, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus—the people of Mordecai' Esther 3.5-6.*

Haman's pride was hurt and the true nature of the man revealed itself. His pent up hatred for the Jews, like that of Hitler in the last century, came to the fore. Here is an Old Testament example of anti-Semitism in all its ugliness. How hatred can fester in our hearts until suddenly it is revealed in its ugliness and rage!

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### **Superstition**

*In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, the lot), before Haman to determine the day and the month, until it fell on the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar’ Esther 3.7.*

The Amalekites believed the universe was governed by chance. A common characteristic of worldly pride is superstition, the notion that human history is governed by fate, luck, or the stars, rather than Almighty God. Satan loves people to be guided by witches, mediums, spirits, stars, planets and dice – anything that is not the Word of God.

*‘The Lord has made all for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom...The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord’ Proverbs 16.4, 33.*

### **Deceit**

*‘Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from all other people’s, and they do not keep the king’s laws. Therefore it is not fitting for the king to let them remain”’ Esther 3.8.*

This is Haman painting people in a bad light, making false accusations to support his case.

### **Corruption**

*‘If it pleases the king, let a decree be written that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who do the work, to bring it into the king’s treasuries’ Esther 3.9.*

Ten thousand talents of silver is equivalent to two-thirds of the annual revenue of the Persian Empire.

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### **Power**

*'So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. And the king said to Haman, "The money and the people are given to you, to do with them as seems good to you"' Esther 3.10-11.*

Here is the driving force behind pride!

### **Callousness**

*'The couriers went out, hastened by the king's command; and the decree was proclaimed in Shushan the citadel. So the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Shushan was perplexed' Esther 3.15.*

This is the fruit of Haman's actions. History is scattered with world leaders who have behaved in this manner. Hardness is the inevitable outcome of such hatred. The recipients of the decree reacted with grief, which is the consequence of hatred.

### **Conclusion**

#### **a. Pray for the persecuted Church**

Remember the overall picture of an attack by Satan – an attempt to exterminate the Jews, and consequently overturn the perfect fulfillment of God's promised Messiah via the seed of Abraham. Now, in the New Testament age, Satan is attacking the Church and attempting to destroy it. It is estimated that currently there are 330,000 Christians being martyred every year throughout the world. They are different from all other peoples.

#### **b. Pray for our leaders**

The King was continually being fed a diet of selected information by his ministers. But he was out of touch with reality. The King was a typical example of one being governed by false information.

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### **c. Pray for the courage to be different when the need arises**

Mordecai is an inspiration for us to stand alone for God, willing to be different. He knew that a man's duty to obey the governing authorities has limits. We are obliged to obey rulers in all areas of their God-given mandate. However, once they impose laws which clash with the authority of God, then human government has to be disobeyed.

*'But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard"' Acts 4.19-20.*



## 4. GOD'S SERVANT IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

### *Esther 4*

In the previous chapter we saw what happens when a self-important man comes head-to-head with a man of principle. The wise man goes about his business quietly and consistently, while the proud man lashes out cruelly and vindictively.

#### **The consequences of obedience**

Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman even though the King had commanded this action from his subjects. Mordecai, as a Jew, refused to bow down to such a man even if it meant breaking the state commandment. His stand was not dissimilar to that of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's image.

The famous preacher Charles Spurgeon once said, 'Your duty is to be faithful and to leave the consequences with the Lord.' Imagine how Mordecai must have felt leaving the consequences with the Lord. It was estimated that approximately fifteen million Jews resided in the Persian Empire. Within eleven months there was to be the greatest slaughter of mankind the world has ever seen. Mordecai had honoured God: his stand was a public decision of faith in Him in a secular society. To bow down to Haman symbolised turning his back upon God and rejecting Him in the spirit of expediency. But now, having taken the step, Mordecai must have felt the terrible burden of the outcome of his obedience.

This is an extreme example of the powers of evil battling against the power of good. Nevertheless, important lessons can be learned from these events. Do not be surprised if opposition is the consequence of

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obedience. Do not be surprised at the extent to which Satan will go in his opposition. But at the same time remember the privilege of suffering for the sake of God's honour.

When Haman realised Mordecai refused to bow to him, he was filled with rage. His deep-seated hatred of the Jews came to the surface. As we have seen Haman was a descendent of King Agag, the king of the Amalekites. The Children of Israel had done battle with them under Moses. The Amalekites had made a treacherous attack upon them from behind.

*'Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you were coming out of Egypt, how he met you on the way and attacked your rear ranks, all the stragglers at your rear, when you were tired and weary; and he did not fear God. Therefore it shall be, when the Lord your God has given you rest from your enemies all around, in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance, that you will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. You shall not forget' Deuteronomy 25.17-19.*

King Saul, who thought he knew better than God, had not destroyed them according to God's commandment. Now this disobedience came home to roost. One of their descendants in a position of power was seeking to destroy the Jewish nation.

We only have to look at the situation in the city of Jerusalem today to realise how deep-seated and long-held hatred between nations can fester. The seed of hatred watered by pride resulted in a devastating attempt to exterminate the Jews. Haman was going to attempt an Old Testament holocaust.

Haman certainly had great influence, power and wealth. As mentioned in the previous chapter, he promised a huge sum of money to the King for the extermination of those fifteen million Jews. The

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character of Haman is a picture of what happens when sin is allowed to govern a person's life unrestrained. God hates the sin of pride; it has marred those He has created in his own image.

*These six things the Lord hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren' Proverbs 6.16-19.*

Pride blinds people to what they really are, and makes them insist on what they do not deserve.

Haman's promotion brought out the worst in him, whereas, when Mordecai was promoted later, it brought out the best out in him. How do we cope with promotion? Haman wanted to be a man of success, whereas Mordecai a man of value.

Haman got the edict he wanted from the King, and the awful message was sent hurriedly throughout the Persian Empire. Why is it bad news seems to travel faster than good news?

*'The couriers went out, hastened by the king's command; and the decree was proclaimed in Shushan the citadel. So the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Shushan was perplexed' Esther 3.15.*

In Haman's estimation the Jews were simply objects or numbers.

### **The day of despair**

The King, drinking with Haman, lived in another world. No sorrow, death, poverty or injury must be seen by the King. He just did not want to know such a situation; everybody inside the gates must be happy. He lived in a so-called artificial paradise bubble.

However, when this terrible decree became known to the Jews there was obvious distress and despair. Mordecai made a public display of

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his grief, as far as he could, outside the palace gates. Mordecai was not a man to do nothing. It has been said that all that is required for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.

But situations can quickly change. Esther had been queen for four years. The Jews were allowed to live without persecution, but through the principled stand of Mordecai all this had changed. We live in a world of changing circumstances. Our lives are affected, sometimes suddenly, as on 11 September 2001 when the twin towers in New York were destroyed by terrorists.

It is worth noting that later Haman also suddenly faced a change for time and eternity.

### **The day of decision – the responsibility of obedience**

At first it seems Esther was unaware of the problem. Shut up in the palace she was shielded and insulated. Many people believe in the well-known saying, 'Ignorance is bliss'.

Esther's first reaction was typical of how we often resort to material things to cover grief. When Esther heard of Mordecai being dressed in sackcloth she sent him clothes, not appreciating the situation.

One man was going to be a key link in the contact between them both – Hathach. God often uses people whom the world considers insignificant to accomplish tasks of great significance. Hathach was one of these men. W Clement Stone once said, 'Big doors swing on little hinges.' So great events can turn upon the deeds of small and sometimes anonymous people.

Esther enquired as to the reason for Mordecai's behaviour and received a reply which shook her to the core. The man who was so protective of her was now advocating an action which threatened her life! The news was not only shocking but also personally challenging.

Esther quite naturally at first hid behind the law and the circumstances surrounding her at the time. One cannot just 'pop in' to see

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the King: it was not as simple as that. Not even the Queen had such freedom. She reacted in the same way as we would under the circumstances – she ran for cover. When Esther was faced with the reality of the situation she thought it was impossible for her to do anything. Maybe she even felt secure in the palace as queen.

She received an answer from Mordecai through which God spoke to her in such a way to bring her to realise the reality of her own position. She was a Jew and was therefore under the same condemnation despite being a queen. She had a God-given opportunity to help, but had to realise that if she remained silent, God would still deliver. God had sworn He would be at war with the Amalekites to every generation. He would blot out Amalek from under Heaven. He would not let Haman – who represents Amalek – blot out Israel. The question was, would Esther align herself with her people or with the pagans?

Deliverance could only come through obedience. The alternative for her and her immediate family would ultimately be destruction. God was sovereign over a secular society; therefore He had brought her to the kingdom for such a time. Mordecai fervently believed that in this looming disaster God was at work.

### **The responsibility of obedience**

*'For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' Esther 4.14.*

This statement by Mordecai is the turning point in the book. Here he states the truth, even if the truth challenges: face the reality and do not sit on the fence.

- God had divine purposes to accomplish in this world – Esther had a personal responsibility in the situation.

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- God accomplishes His purposes through people – she, on the other hand, was not indispensable.
- God will accomplish His purposes even if His servants refuse to obey His will – she is in her position for a purpose at exactly the right time.

Mordecai reminded Esther of the doctrine of God's providence. Do we really believe in this doctrine?

Having said all this, humanly speaking everything was against Esther and the success of her mission. The government was against her; the decree was against her; the fact she was a woman was against her – the King's attitude towards women was worse than chauvinistic; the officers were against her. But –

*'If God is for us, who can be against us?' Romans 8.31.*

There are times when, however difficult it may seem, we have to recognise we are God's people in the places where God wants us to be, to fulfil God's purposes. Recognising and accepting this responsibility, and deciding to stand for what is right, takes courage and grace. So for Queen Esther it was an inescapable situation; she faced the biggest challenge in her life.

### **The day of discipline – the nature of her obedience**

Mordecai's words under God brought forth the fruit of obedience in Esther, affecting the mind, heart and will. Having made the decision to go before the King, Esther called for help and support. She commanded that they should all express their dependence upon God by fasting. Esther did not rush into the King; she waited first upon God. She did not try to do this on her own, but she called for help.

When we want God to help us, then we need to diligently seek His face. This requires discipline.

Esther called for fasting with fellowship and prayer. Fasting focuses our minds on the issue at hand. Our actions show how seriously we

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view the situation. Fasting is an act of consecration. It has no power or merit in and of itself, but serves our prayer life.

### **The day of determination**

What a difference there is between going before a self-important king like Ahasuerus and going to God the Father through Jesus Christ the Son! At the appointed time Esther went to present herself to the King. She set her face steadfastly to go before the King knowing she might die. Hundreds of years later her Saviour, Jesus Christ, set His face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem knowing He would certainly die.

Note the courage and determination of Esther to stand by her word in the face of great danger. There are times when loyalty to God and His people will result in an act of civil disobedience. Obedience to God sometimes means disobedience to man's rules. Esther's actions humanly speaking made her physically more vulnerable and yet she was spiritually strong. Imagine having no food or water for three days! This type of sacrificial submission to God's will was perfectly displayed in Jesus Christ.

*'Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done' Luke 22.42.*

*'But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us...For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life' Romans 5.8, 10.*

The awesome responsibility became an awesome privilege to represent God's people. Esther understood she was in God's schedule and God's plan for such a time. She understood that in her weakness lay the opportunity for God to demonstrate His strength. She understood that the need of the hour was determined obedience.

What she did was against the state law and against the state tradition.

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This reminds us that Esther obeyed an even greater law than the law of even the most powerful man in the world at that time.

### **The day of deliverance**

The first step towards the deliverance of the Jews was acceptance before the King's throne. The sceptre provided the sign of acceptance. As Esther stood in the entrance to the court the King saw her. His acceptance was signified as he held out the golden sceptre. There is great significance in this picture of the sceptre. Christ is the Sceptre of righteousness.

*'I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult' Numbers 24.17.*

*'But to the Son He says: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of Your kingdom"' Hebrews 1.8.*

### **Conclusion**

Several Christian writers use this apt quote:

'In the moral conflict now raging around us, whoever is on God's side is on the winning side and cannot ultimately lose; whoever is on the other side is on the losing side and cannot possibly be the ultimate winner.' A W Tozer.

## 5. THE ASCENT OF HUMILITY AND THE DESCENT OF PRIDE

### *Esther 5*

The *Book of Esther* assures us that in the midst of evil when matters seem to be spiralling out of control – God still reigns. In *Esther 5* we see that what seems a paradox for man demonstrates that God is in perfect control.

*‘Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you’ 1 Peter 5.5-7.*

*‘Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall’ Proverbs 16.18.*

*‘A man’s pride will bring him low, but the humble in spirit will retain honour’ Proverbs 29.23.*

We will look at the comparison between Esther and Haman.

#### **The ascent of humility**

This was the right time for Esther to act. Everything was done decently and in order. Esther had set aside three days for fasting and for three days that is what she did. She then went forward into the King’s palace into the inner court in the right spirit, with the right attitude and in the right way. She was prepared for this event through prayer and fasting, not through human wisdom.

As she stood before the King her body, mind and spirit were consecrated to God: *‘If I perish, I perish.’* Her action and timing going

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into the King was one of the great steps of faith recorded for us in the Bible.

- **The right place.** Esther stood in the inner court visible to the King on his royal throne. At this critical point of life and death she stood in the court. Here was the ultimate act of faith for Esther. The matter of her acceptance depended upon the Lord ensuring that the King held out the golden sceptre.
- **The right respect.** Esther dressed in her royal robes for the occasion. She understood that humility does not preclude the need to dress respectfully for such an occasion. The original means literally Esther 'put on her royalty'. This was the royal apparel the King had originally bestowed upon her, and it was like putting on her wedding dress to reappear before the King. There was a beauty in her appearance before the King.
- **The right demeanour.** Esther had the comfort of knowing there were many people praying for her in secret. This knowledge no doubt assured her and affected her demeanour. We need prayer support for difficult meetings.
- **The right restraint.** Esther did not submit her main request, knowing that this was not the time and place. Rather she let patience work its perfect work.

*'My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing' James 1.2-4.*

A private dinner would be more suitable with Haman present. Haman must be held accountable, and Mordecai, in the providence of God, must be honoured.

The preparation and subsequent approach of Esther before the King provides an example of truly trusting in God. There was no hint of

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panic or desperation, despite the fact she could have lost her life in the process. There was a calm dignity about the whole proceedings which was a fruit of true dependence upon God.

The outcome is acceptance and Esther is exalted.

*‘The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes’ Proverbs 21.1.*

### **Symbolism of this event**

There are two symbols in this account which remind us in some way of our acceptance with God.

**a. Robe.** Royal robes provided for the Queen to wear remind us of the robe of righteousness God gives His children through the Lord Jesus.

*‘I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels’ Isaiah 61.10.*

**b. Sceptre.** This symbolises the bridge of intercession provided by the Lord Jesus between God and His children.

*‘All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that any man or woman who goes into the inner court to the king, who has not been called, he has but one law: put all to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden sceptre, that he may live’ Esther 4.11.*

*‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of Your kingdom’ Psalm 45.6 and Hebrews 1.8.*

These events demonstrate the ascent of humility inasmuch as the fruit is exaltation under the hand of God.

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### **The descent of pride**

Haman was a man consumed with himself. The cry of Esther, *'If I perish, I perish'*, contrasts sharply with the self-interest of Haman. Position always goes to a proud person's head. A proud person can never properly handle promotion. They take all the credit to themselves and cherish the day they think they have 'made it' in life.

Haman had a problem with his ego! His pride meant he wanted to talk about himself, to be admired. His pride, naturally speaking, was his downfall, his descent. His pride stopped him from asking important questions: Why was Queen Esther inviting him to the banquet? Why was the Queen taking an interest in him?

Haman's pride meant he could not cope with being rejected by someone he considered inferior. Pride and hatred go together. Something about Mordecai sent him into a rage. I would suggest to you that this was not just because Mordecai did not bow to him: this was racial hatred. He wanted Mordecai humiliated and out of his mind even before the edict against the Jews could be enacted.

Haman's pride meant he needed people around him telling him what he wanted to hear.

*'Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Let a gallows be made, fifty cubits high, and in the morning suggest to the king that Mordecai be hanged on it; then go merrily with the king to the banquet." And the thing pleased Haman; so he had the gallows made' Esther 5.14.*

Every step Haman took to exalt and promote himself before the King and his family was another step downwards to the unseen pit of destruction.

### **The problem of pride**

'Our father is Adam, our grandfather is the dust, and our great grandfather nothing.' The Puritan William Jenkyn.

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‘The only thing the Bible says is great about humanity is its sin.’  
Warren Wiersbe.

*‘Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth’ Genesis 6.5.*

On that night Esther went to sleep at peace with God. Haman went to sleep at peace with himself. The King, in the providence of God, could not go to sleep. God was in control of the situation. The hidden ascent of humility and the hidden descent of pride was all to be revealed in God’s time!



## 6. THE SILENT, UNSEEN HAND OF GOD AT WORK

### *Esther 6*

An important characteristic of God's sovereign dealings with humanity is clearly evidenced in this chapter: the silent and unseen hand of God working behind the scenes. We will consider how this truth is proved in this chapter.

*'That night the king could not sleep' Esther 6.1a.*

This raises the question, to what extent does God intervene in the ordinary affairs of life? Here is common problem occurring at a critical time. What appears to men to be chance actually has the unseen hand of God working behind the scenes. We also see this in the case of Ruth.

*'Then she left, and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers. And she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech' Ruth 2.3.*

Was it chance or providence? God who can keep a man awake can also make him sleep, as we see in these two examples.

*'And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place' Genesis 2.21.*

*'Now in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; and his spirit was so troubled that his sleep left him' Daniel 2.1.*

*'So one was commanded to bring the book of the records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king' Esther 6.1b.*

The fact that the King chose to have a history lesson in the middle

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of the night evidences God's overruling providence. It may have been thought by the King's advisors that the possible boring nature of the reading material would induce sleep. But God ensured the King was alert and awake.

*'And it was found written...' Esther 6.2a.*

The most critical and important record was chosen to be read. Of all the books containing the Chronicles of the Empire, the one containing Mordecai's faithfulness was read. The whole matter was under God's unseen divine control. As we noted previously, Mordecai had learned, in the providence of God, that two traitors were intending to kill the King. A lot hinges on a little in the providence of God, and we need to respect the little events. They are as much part of God's working as the big events, because without these small events, God's big events could not take place.

The King had a question. As this account was read out to him he asked what honour and dignity had been bestowed on Mordecai for this. Ahasuerus was evidently touched by this loyalty, and now with royal protocol he is concerned that a reward is made.

Something of the grace in Mordecai's life is seen here. He had saved the King's life, but around five years had passed since that event. At no time do we read of Mordecai complaining that he had not received a reward. He remained at the King's gate. When humility and faithfulness combine, their voice can make a powerful impact in God's perfect time.

Ahasuerus called for Haman. At exactly the same time as Haman came in to the King's court, intent on destroying Mordecai, the King was intent on honouring Mordecai. But Haman was totally unaware of the unseen hand of God overruling his actions and intended words.

*'So Haman came in, and the king asked him, "What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honour?"' Esther 6.6a.*

## *The Silent, Unseen Hand of God at Work*

The King's question is definite and yet impersonal. If he had mentioned Mordecai at this point Haman would have made serious adjustments to his answer. But Haman's pride was overruled to work for Mordecai's honour. The full extent of Haman's pride was now seen in self-promotion. It would appear that, like Satan had the throne of God in his sights, so Haman was taking steps to this end. If anything happened to the King, Haman would be in a prime position to take over.

'Pride,' says C S Lewis, 'is the essential evil leading to every other vice.' Haman in his pride thought he was writing his own job description, but he was actually writing Mordecai's reward.

*"Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord' Romans 12.19.*

God is the King of reversals and here is a powerful example. Haman, who demanded Mordecai should bow to him, had to go through the streets commanding men and women to bow down to Mordecai.

*'Surely the wrath of man shall praise You' Psalm 76.10.*

Mordecai was not seeking this honour, and neither did this event go to his head. Straightaway he returned to his old position at the King's gate. Haman's fate was sealed even before the King was made aware of his evil. We see how God was continually going before. He is not a reactive God but a proactive God. Events happen with His foreknowledge.

*'Afterward Mordecai went back 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 wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him." While they were still talking with him, the king's*

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*eunuchs came, and hastened to bring Haman to the banquet which Esther had prepared' Esther 6.12-14.*

Haman realized his days were numbered, but still did not repent. This illustrates the labour and wages of pride. Haman was forced to his judgment. Yesterday he had gone out joyful and with a glad heart lifted up with pride; today he is taken with a heavy heart to the banquet and to his judgment.

*'The hope of the righteous will be gladness, but the expectation of the wicked will perish' Proverbs 10.28.*

### **Conclusion**

Are we willing to trust in the unseen hand of God, or does our faith always demand visible evidence? This chapter is full of evidence supporting the God Who is working out His providence behind the scenes.

Have faith in the unseen hand of God and realise that God is never in a hurry. It seems Esther understood that 'hurry, hurry has no blessing'. She was willing to patiently allow this matter to unfold in God's time.

Are we willing to be faithful and leave the consequences with the Lord? Would we be willing like Mordecai, even after extensive publicity, to be content to go back to our old position, to continue to wait on the Lord?

Do we take God's little things for granted? Do we forget the significance of 'coincidences' being all part of the unfolding plan that God weaves in our life?

## 7. SOWING AND REAPING

### *Esther 7*

There are times in our lives when it seems that the tide of evil is unstoppable and runs without restraint. Occasionally we stop and consider why it is that the believer struggles, yet the unbeliever seems proudly to continue and to make far greater progress in this world.

I was in conversation with a friend who commented on the way in which his unbelieving friends make decisions with no reference to God, and seem to get their own way and what they want. Their success rubs salt in the wounds of those who commit their way to the Lord yet find obstacles in their path.

*'For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked...They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth...Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches...Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors' Psalm 73.3,9,12,17-19.*

*'And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man' Luke 17.26.*

It is with this solemn realisation we consider *Esther 7*. In the end every unbeliever who rejects God has to come to their day of reckoning. This chapter reminds us there is a judgment.

#### **Esther**

Firstly we consider Queen Esther maintaining dignity in a decadent world. There, in the providence of God, in the right position to pre-

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sent her petition, she maintains a dignified respect for the King.

*'By long forbearance a ruler is persuaded, and a gentle tongue breaks a bone' Proverbs 25.15.*

Queen Esther spoke to the King's heart, revealing her nationality and the evil plan against her people. She showed up the evil for what it was! Queen Esther revealed the guilty man behind the evil. In her behaviour she is an example of sanctified power, respect, wisdom, loyalty and justice.

This account proves that it is possible for a believer to be placed by God in an important position politically. It also demonstrates the influence that a believer can have for good in such a position as they live under the divine influence of God. Esther did not abuse her position, neither did she underestimate it. She simply lived as a believer in the role she found herself in.

Let us pray that we will live unto the Lord in whatever providential position we find ourselves.

### **Haman**

Here is an awful example of the terrible end of a person who refuses to acknowledge who they are. Haman is a powerful example of how evil people react when things start going against them. Consider the contrast between sadness and terror, between dependence upon God and dependence upon man.

What can we learn from Haman? The wicked seem invincible until they are faced with death: then they are terrified. At this point in the account, it reads like an unbeliever's worse nightmare. What a contrast!

The wicked will go to extraordinary lengths to save face.

*'When the king returned from the palace garden to the place of the banquet of wine, Haman had fallen across the couch where*

## *Sowing and Reaping*

*Esther was' Esther 7.8.*

The wicked provide the rope on which to hang themselves.

*'Then the king said, "Hang him on it!"' Esther 7.9b.*

In the face of disaster the arrogant bully became a whining coward. Note the contrast between the faithful testimony of Esther – *'If I perish, I perish' (Esther 4.16)* – and the terror of Haman.

One of the saddest points of Haman's testimony is that he never acknowledged his guilt nor repented of his evil. He had a number of opportunities to repent of his evil intent. Even his family eventually told him he would never succeed in his mission. Pride is a killer.

*'Everyone proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord; though they join forces, none will go unpunished' Proverbs 16.5.*

Haman mistook God's longsuffering for a sign that he could live his life just as he wanted, as those mentioned by Peter.

*'...saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation"' 2 Peter 3.4.*

There is a day of reckoning!

### **Conclusion**

The Bible teaches us the principle of sowing and reaping.

*'He who sows iniquity will reap sorrow, and the rod of his anger will fail' Proverbs 22.8.*

*'Even as I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same' Job 4.8.*

Haman sowed hatred and anger against Mordecai and the Jews, and suffered at the hands of an angry king. Haman wanted to kill Mordecai but ended up being killed himself.

The Christian is called to sow in the Spirit.

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*'Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap' Galatians 6.7.*

*'And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward' Matthew 10.42.*

See also *Matthew 25.31-46.*

## 8. GOD'S SOVEREIGN REVERSALS

### *Esther 8*

Chapter 8 begins with a remarkable reversal worked out in this secular society by a sovereign God. Not only is there a Jewish God-fearing Queen in Persia, but now there is a Jewish God-fearing Prime Minister. Mordecai's relationship with Esther is revealed and he receives the King's signet ring, a sign of honour and trust. Praise God for His awesome reversals over the ways of wicked men! God says:

*'Those who honour Me I will honour' 1 Samuel 2.30.*

Then there is another incredible reversal. The house of Haman, made wealthy through political intrigue, is handed over to Esther. It was a rule in Persia that if someone suffered the death penalty their estate was handed over to the crown. Their relations could not benefit from the wealth of the criminal.

*'A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous' Proverbs 13.22.*

*'For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you' Matthew 7.2.*

*'Wait on the Lord, and keep His way, and He shall exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you shall see it' Psalm 37:34*

#### **Intercession**

*'Now Esther spoke again to the king, fell down at his feet, and implored him with tears to counteract the evil of Haman the Agagite, and the scheme which he had devised against the Jews. And the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So*

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*Esther arose and stood before the king, and said, "If it pleases the king, and if I have found favour in his sight and the thing seems right to the king and I am pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to annihilate the Jews who are in all the king's provinces. For how can I endure to see the evil that will come to my people? Or how can I endure to see the destruction of my countrymen?"* Esther 8.3-6.

The testimony of Esther at this point is truly remarkable. She had succeeded, in the mercy of God, in overcoming wicked Haman. Her own life and that of Mordecai was assured. However, there remained the danger to her people. She continued to identify herself with her people in the presence of the King and would not rest until justice for her people had been finally secured.

Here is picture of true, courageous compassion in the interests of others. We see her example of intercession with humility, with tears and with feeling in verse 3; of intercession with courage and respect in verse 4; and of intercession with sympathy in verse 6. This is a picture of the intercession of Jesus Christ for Himself and for His Church which is always on His heart.

*'... Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear'* Hebrews 5.7.

### **Intervention**

*'You yourselves write a decree concerning the Jews, as you please, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's signet ring; for whatever is written in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet ring no one can revoke.'* So the king's scribes were called at that time, in the third month, which is the month of

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*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 from India to Ethiopia, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces in all, to every province in its own script, to every people in their own language, and to the Jews in their own script and language. And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus, sealed it with the king's signet ring, and sent letters by couriers on horseback, riding on royal horses bred from swift steeds' Esther 8.8-10.*

Mordecai was instructed by the King to write a decree concerning the Jews. Here Mordecai was given freedom and authority as a man whose word can be trusted. He was a person upon whose wisdom the King is prepared to put his seal. The decree composed by Mordecai was written in a language and manner the recipients could clearly understand. There was to be no confusion on this issue. The message of deliverance and hope must be understood by all who read it, for did not their very life depend upon it? There are several points we should note about this message:

- It was to be sent urgently by couriers on royal horses bred for speed;
- It was a message which taught the principle of defence against aggression;
- It was delivered with authority and commitment;
- It brought deliverance and hope to the Jews;
- It transformed the situation;
- It was a message which brought light into the darkness, and set a day of hope against a day of destruction.

Surely this should remind us of the message the Gospel brings to needy sinners like you and me. This Gospel message needs to be spread throughout the world clearly and urgently – as it is a matter of life and death – and with authority and commitment.

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### **Inspiration**

*'So Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, with a great crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple; and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad' Esther 8.15.*

We are now given an account of the way Mordecai went out from the presence of the King. He went as a member of the royal family. Everything that Haman had acquired from the King by his scheming, Mordecai received as free gift.

His presence and his glory brought joy and gladness to the city of Shushan. He was before the Jews as their deliverer and before the Gentiles as a man who deserved respect and honour. Mordecai and his message had the fruit of joy and gladness. The perplexing cloud which hung over Shushan had been lifted.

As the message was received throughout the provinces and cities, there was celebration with a holiday and a feast. The deliverance of the Jews had a tremendous impact upon Persia. Many turned to the Jewish religion out of fear. Among those who did so just for convenience, popular opinion and prudence, there would have been those who were truly moved and converted. What Satan had meant for evil found its ultimate reversal in the conversion of many to the Jewish faith. Throughout Persia there were also now many Gentile God-fearers.

The portrayal of Mordecai, and the resulting joy and respect, provides a picture for us of the victory of deliverance through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

*'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim*

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*the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified' Isaiah 61.1-3.*

As the Jews were identified with Mordecai, so those who trust and believe in Jesus Christ are identified with Him. He is the One to Whom we look for deliverance and inspiration. His triumph is our triumph. It is through Jesus Christ that we can experience true joy and gladness and, in that joy and gladness, be a witness to those around us. As this message brought light, hope and security, so Jesus is to us the Light that dispels the darkness of sin and unbelief.

### **Application**

What really made the difference for the Jews at such a time? There was the decree, and the faithful distribution and proclamation of the decree, but ultimately the way they believed in the decree was the key. There could be no joy and gladness without trusting the security of the decree. This reminds us that we need to have faith in God's covenant promise in Jesus Christ the Lord.

*'Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit' Romans 15.13.*



## 9. RETRIBUTION AND REMEMBRANCE

### *Esther 9*

In the last chapter we considered how Esther interceded for her people while Mordecai intervened with the law on their behalf, and proved an inspiration, bringing joy and gladness. He was a picture of the joy of salvation and deliverance in Christ Jesus the Lord. In Chapter 9 we are told about retribution and remembrance.

#### **Retribution: *Esther 9.1-17***

This word refers to the way that the Jews legally applied vengeance upon their aggressors who sought their destruction. It is easy to sit in our armchairs and take what we consider to be a moralistic view of the action of the Jews, as them being vindictive. But when considering such an event it is important that we remind ourselves of the context. In so doing we can learn important lessons as to why God in His sovereignty allowed this.

This event was one of God's awesome reversals – annihilation was reversed to just judgment. Haman's law demanding the total extermination of the Jewish race was actually still valid – it was an unalterable law – but the subsequent law allowing the Jews to defend themselves was now equally valid and also unalterable. The first law was vindictive and unjust, the second law was defensive and just. The first law allowed for the plundering of all Jewish possessions, the second law did not allow the enemies' goods to be plundered. The retribution was limited in time and purpose to just two days. The Jews obeyed the decree and did not plunder the possessions.

*'The ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews they killed; but they did not lay a hand on the plunder...*

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*And the Jews who were in Shushan gathered together again on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and killed three hundred men at Shushan; but they did not lay a hand on the plunder. The remainder of the Jews in the king's provinces gathered together and protected their lives, had rest from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of their enemies; but they did not lay a hand on the plunder' Esther 9.10, 15-16.*

- The Jews did what they needed to defend themselves within the law.

*'The Jews gathered together in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could withstand them, because fear of them fell upon all people' Esther 9.2.*

They only acted in self defence against those that hated them and were intent on killing them.

- The witness of God's power bore the fruit of fear and respect for the Jews, and particularly for Mordecai.

*'And all the officials of the provinces, the satraps, the governors, and all those doing the king's work, helped the Jews, because the fear of Mordecai fell upon them' Esther 9.3.*

Note seventy-five thousand dead equates to only six hundred dead per province, compared with the total intended annihilation of the Jews. Or compare this with the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust. Only those who harboured racial hatred against the Jews, and who were intent on murdering them, were destroyed. This was their judgment. How would we respond if faced with the death sentence but given the legal right to protect our families?

- The genealogy of Christ was at the heart of the preservation of the Jewish race.

There are times when God allows His judgments to be worked out through men. The Lord Jesus loved Jerusalem and wept because of

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the hardness of the hearts of its inhabitants. Yet in AD70 God allowed the Roman Empire to destroy the city for their terrible rejection of the Messiah.

God is impartial and just in His dealings: this is what we must remember at all times in God's reversals.

### **Remembrance: *Esther 9.18-32***

The second part of this chapter bring our attention to the importance of remembering past deliverances. This deliverance still remains in the Jewish calendar as a fixed annual event to this day. They give thanks to God and remember this remarkable deliverance, even in spite of the memories of the much more terrible Holocaust later in history.

In terms of its festivities it bears a remarkable similarity to the way we celebrate Christmas. There is a day of fasting for worship, then of feasting and joy when presents are sent to one another, and gifts given to the poor. This became a custom not commanded by God but allowed by God. Christmas can be wholesome if it is kept with thanksgiving.

It was called the feast of Purim, from the word 'Pur' referring to a wooden cube like a modern dice.

*'...because Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to annihilate them, and had cast Pur (that is, the lot), to consume them and destroy them; but when Esther came before the king, he commanded by letter that this wicked plot which Haman had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. So they called these days Purim, after the name Pur' Esther 9.24-26.*

Haman threw this dice as an act of superstitious nonsense to ensure his decree would fall on a 'lucky' day. He trusted in chance and would

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never make a big decision without consulting his lucky numbers. The feast of Purim is so called to remind the participants of the stupidity of relying on superstition.

We see the significance of passing on to the next generation what has been learned from events.

*'Therefore, because of all the words of this letter, what they had seen concerning this matter, and what had happened to them, the Jews established and imposed it upon themselves and their descendants and all who should join them, that without fail they should celebrate these two days every year, according to the written instructions and according to the prescribed time, that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city, that these days of Purim should not fail to be observed among the Jews, and that the memory of them should not perish among their descendants' Esther 9.26-28.*

In this throwaway society it has become unfashionable to remember history, even in church circles. For example, there are not so many Church anniversaries held for thanksgiving today.

This celebration reminds us of the importance of preserving certain times to remember, to give thanks to God for past mercies. The principle of annually remembering God's past deliverances is set out here. We are commanded by Jesus to remember Him regularly in partaking of the Lord's Supper. How much of our remembering is a celebration of deliverance in Christ?

*'And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you...' Deuteronomy 8.2.*

This remembering provides us with a picture of deliverance in Christ. There had been fasting and lamenting (confession); there had

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been a calling on God (prayer); and the fruit of dependence is deliverance (joy and feasting, and assurance in Him). For these Jews there was a fruit of peace and truth.

*'And Mordecai sent letters to all the Jews, to the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, with words of peace and truth' Esther 9.30.*

This is the message of the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ!

### **Conclusion**

We should never forget to say 'thank you' to the Lord.

We need to know how to mourn and how to rejoice.



# 10. HOW TO HANDLE GREATNESS

## *Esther 10*

### A quick overview

- In Chapter 1 we saw in King Ahasuerus how power and pride produce the evil fruit of attention-seeking, arrogance and aggression.
- In the second chapter we considered the testimony of Esther and Mordecai, how they maintained a proper dignity in a decadent world.
- The third chapter showed the problem in the heart of Haman. This hatred manifested itself in deceit, corruption, power and callousness, causing grief.
- In the fourth chapter we considered the consequences of obedience arising from the faithfulness of Mordecai who pressed on looking unto his Lord. We saw the responsibility of obedience that then fell to Esther and concluded by considering the nature of her obedience demonstrated by fasting, prayer and dependence.
- In Chapter 5 we saw the hidden ascent of humility and the hidden descent of pride.
- Chapter 6 showed us important characteristics of God's sovereign dealings with humanity, the silent and unseen hand of God working behind the scenes. We concluded by asking ourselves, are we willing to trust and believe in the unseen hand of God?
- In the seventh chapter we have the biblical principles of sowing and reaping. Haman sowed hatred and anger against Mordecai and the Jews, and suffered at the hands of an angry king. Haman wanted to kill Mordecai, and ended up being killed himself. God's judgment comes against the wicked who think they can escape, but finally they hit the wall of His justice. Esther and Mordecai, as believers, sowed in the Spirit, fearing God, and were blessed.

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- Chapter 8 showed how Esther interceded and Mordecai intervened under God, and how the fruit of this resulted in inspiring the Jews to joy and gladness and hope for deliverance.
- In Chapter 9 we considered the area of disciplined retribution and the importance of remembrance.

The purpose of our studies has been to demonstrate how God works in a secular society. The evil of man does not prevent the accomplishment of the sovereign purposes of God. God can change situations in an amazing manner. He is not rendered powerless by evil, but rather He overcomes evil, demonstrating His supreme power.

In the final chapter of *Esther* we are told about how Mordecai handled greatness.

### **His position of power**

*'For Mordecai the Jew was second to King Ahasuerus, and was great among the Jews' Esther 10.3a.*

The fact that God occasionally promotes people to positions of greatness is evident in the Scriptures. Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Job and Daniel all testify to this fact. The great test is how the person behaves when in such a position.

- Abraham is described as the great man of faith (*Galatians 3.9, Hebrews 11.8-10*).
- Joseph was recognized as a man in whom the Spirit of God dwelt (*Genesis 39.2, 23*).
- Moses was a meek man (*Numbers 12.3*).
- David was a man after God's heart (*Acts 13.22*).
- Job was one who feared God and shunned evil (*Job 1.1*).
- Daniel is described as a man greatly beloved (*Daniel 9.23*).

These things were said of these men at the time when they were in

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positions of power and greatness. The point is that these men were truly great men because they could handle greatness graciously.

Some men could not do so. Hezekiah showed the Babylonian ambassadors all his riches, as a result of his pride.

*‘However, regarding the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, whom they sent to him to inquire about the wonder that was done in the land, God withdrew from him, in order to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart’ 2 Chronicles 32.31.*

Now Mordecai was a man who handled greatness graciously. He was the same Mordecai inside the King’s gate as the Mordecai outside the King’s gate.

‘Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power’ Abraham Lincoln.

The comparison between Haman and Mordecai is stark and devastating. Mordecai handled promotion graciously – Haman handled promotion proudly. Haman strove, struggled and fought for personal promotion, power and popularity. Mordecai’s struggle was for his people, not for himself.

### **His presentation of policy**

*‘...and well-received by the multitude of his brethren’ Esther 10.3b.*

When we consider the promotion of Mordecai it can only be explained by the sovereign power of God. In the same way as Joseph was catapulted to power, leapfrogging over all the officials in waiting, so Mordecai found himself suddenly second only to the King. Not only did he behave himself wisely and graciously, but he presented his policy and plans acceptably. God had prepared and equipped Mordecai – God was with Mordecai. It is evident he was a politician who could be trusted, a true God-fearing Prime Minister.

Mordecai was well received because he himself respected those un-

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der his care. He was not patronizing, talking above the people; he was the people's person, representative and voice. Mordecai proves that by being honourable, and God-fearing it is possible to be respected in a secular society. Generally speaking, even people in a secular society look up to their leaders as examples to follow. They are looking for integrity and honesty; they expect a high standard of those in office. This is why failure in this area arouses so much emotion and self-righteous anger. Mordecai was a man who could be looked up to.

It has been said that a good leader is a person with a magnet in his heart and a compass in his head.

The final part of the verse explains and reveals to us the secret behind his successful leadership.

### **His peaceable objective**

*'...seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his countrymen' Esther 10.3c.*

Two characteristics help us to understand the heart of Mordecai's leadership.

#### **a. Seeking the good of his people**

This to me seems one of the most telling statements of Mordecai's leadership.

*'And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith' Galatians 6.9-10.*

#### **b. Speaking peace to all his countrymen**

*'Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence' 1 Timothy 2.1-2.*

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*'...to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men' Titus 3.2.*

*'Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it' Psalm 34.14.*

*'When a man's ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him' Proverbs 16.7.*

As someone has said, 'Do all the good you can, to all the people you can, in all the ways you can.'

### **Conclusion**

- The position of Esther and Mordecai confirms God's interest in the practical and spiritual welfare of His people.
- It confirms God's sovereignty in a secular society.
- It reminds us that God is to be served in both secular and spiritual employment.
- It reminds us that God raises up one and puts down another, and no one can withstand His hand.
- It reminds us that God is a God of justice.
- It reminds us of the blessing attached to having godly people in power and authority. The nation was blessed for the sake of Esther and Mordecai.
- Though the hand of God is hidden, it is still active in the events of mankind.
- God accomplishes His will through people; He calls us not to be spectators but participants.
- God's hand in history does not rule out our actions.
- God will frustrate the wicked and proud, and will exalt the humble.