

Such A Time As This

**A Thirteen Lesson
Bible Study
of the Book of Esther
by Jeff S. Smith**



Foreword

The book of Esther is one of the most exciting books in all the Old Testament and is nearly unique in employing a woman as its leading character. This study follows Hadassah's amazing transformation from anonymous Hebrew maiden to Esther, queen of the Persian realm and providential savior of the Jewish race.

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Lesson One: Introduction

The book of Esther is one of the most exciting books in all the Old Testament and is nearly unique in employing a woman as its leading character. The book is set during the period after the Babylonian exile in which the nation of Persia (present day Iran) ruled Judah. Esther is a young and beautiful Jewish girl, orphaned but cared for by her cousin, Mordecai. The Jews dwell at the mercy of their Persian overlords and it seems as if the scheme of salvation and the Jewish race are hanging precariously by a thread every moment. The book's plot centers on the near extermination of the race and the blood line to Christ by a bigoted official of the king's court.

The context of the book gives no indication as to the identity of its author. Tradition grants the honor to Mordecai, using Esther 9:20 as dubious evidence. Alternatively, the book has been credited to Ezra, Nehemiah, Jehoiakim (Nehemiah 12:10, 26) and the men of the synagogue. Authorship matters little, though, if we accept God's providential oversight in the canon.

Dating the book is just as difficult, although we know that it has to have been written in the last few centuries before Christ. The book of Esther is not mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament, nor anywhere in the New Testament, and is the only book that has no trace in the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is found, however, in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures made 200 years before Christ. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian considered it authentic and ancient.

After the sacking of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., the remnant Jews had been scattered throughout Mesopotamia by the Persian government that ascended as Babylon fell. The Jews clung to their religious identity and even their flickering hope of a Messiah who would rescue them. King Cyrus of Persia fulfilled a divine prophecy that allowed the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild their faith in 536 B.C. Thousands of them made the trek, but most simply remained where they were in Persia, rather than take the risk of starting over. It seems Mordecai and Esther were content to dwell in Persia and not make the trip to the desolated land of their ancestors.

Providence and Purim are the major themes of the book, but dozens of other lessons can be gleaned by disciples of Christ. Mordecai persuades Esther that it might have been providence that brought her to a position of prominence at just the right moment to save his people and that to refuse her call was tantamount to rebellion. The Jewish feast of Purim is born out of the Jews' rescue from Haman's threat as the book concludes.

Overall, the book of Esther reminds the Christian of God's providential care and abiding presence. Our Lord will watch over his people and protect them. Some will fall, but even they are promised a heavenly reward in the end. There is not cause to fear for them that love the Lord.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Esther and Mordecai are not Hebrew names. Can you discern their origin?
2. What had happened to the Jews since Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.?
3. Martin Luther was critical of the book of Esther for several reasons. How many times does it mention Jehovah? Where was the Feast of Purim prescribed by the Law of Moses? How much does it correspond to the gospel message of Christ?
4. How is Purim celebrated today?
5. By what name is Ahasuerus better known?
6. How can we tell for sure that we are witnesses divine providence?
7. How much does God depend upon people—good and bad—to carry out the works of providence he has in mind?
8. What is the lesson for those who love wickedness (Psalm 2:4)?

Lesson Two: Overlords

1. Writing of 538 B.C., Ezra alludes to a prophecy of Jeremiah, which Cyrus would fulfill (Ezra 1:1-4). What had the weeping prophet predicted in approximately 605 B.C. (Jeremiah 25:1-12, 29:10, 33:7-13)?
2. The strategy of Judah's Babylonian conquerors had been to wipe out other religions, including Judaism, but Persia takes a different path. What is the major difference between Cyrus and Nebuchadnezzar (compare the decree of Cyrus with the condemnation of the Babylonian monarchs in Daniel 4:28-30, 5:18-23)?
3. Who went up to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5-11)? Describe two similarities between this journey and the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 12:36, Numbers 14:26-29).
4. With what would they hope to furnish the new temple? How had they been used in the days of Belshazzar the Babylonian regent (Daniel 5:1-4)?
5. What might the modern church (1800s to present) undertake that would be similar to what Israel was about to attempt? (Answers should vary.)

6. This new generation of pilgrims was returning to Israel because God had moved (NKJV), or stirred up (ESV), their spirits. What might this mean, and is something like it possible today?

7. What stirring is recommended by the New Testament?

a. Second Timothy 1:6-14:

b. Second Peter 1:12-15:

c. Second Peter 3:1-2:

8. What so often prevents a disciple from being stirred up or motivated to strive and progress in the faith (First Thessalonians 5:19-22, Second Peter 3:17-18, First Timothy 4:13-16)?

9. To where did each exile return (Ezra 2:1-60, 70)?

10. Why were certain priestly sons prevented from serving (Ezra 2:61-63)?

11. What kind of offerings did they make toward the effort (Ezra 2:64-69)? Why is this preferable to a compulsory contribution (Second Corinthians 8:1-15)?

Lesson Three: Reconstruction

1. Name the two leaders who emerge. Why did they set the altar in place when they did (Ezra 3:1-7)?
2. How would you characterize their attention to worship details thus far? Explain.
3. Is it legalism to observe the work and worship of the church today with as much circumspection and insistence upon strict obedience (Colossians 3:17, Ephesians 5:8-17, First John 2:1-6)? Explain.
4. When might strictness become a religious problem (Matthew 23:23-28, Mark 7:1-7, Acts 15:4-5, Romans 14:10-12)?
5. How did they sing as the foundation was laid (Ezra 3:8-11; First Chronicles 6:31, 25:1)? What is “responsive singing”? Is it still scriptural?
6. Explain the different reactions to the temple foundation (Ezra 3:12-13; Haggai 2:1-5).

7. How did the Jews' adversaries try to discourage the reconstruction (Ezra 4:1-5)?

8. One such accusation is detailed in Ezra 4:6-23. What was the accusation? Did it succeed?

9. What did the remnant do while temple reconstruction was outlawed (Haggai 1:1-6)?

10. How did Haggai and Zechariah inspire the people to resume the work (Ezra 5:1-17, Haggai 1:12-15)?

11. The decree of Darius extended assistance to the Jews with money and materials, but one other command was probably just as helpful. What was it (Ezra 6:1-22)? What is to be our prayer regarding our governments (First Timothy 2:1-2)?

More than 50 years elapse between the events of chapters 6 and 7, during which the rise and reign of Esther in Persia occurs.

Lesson Four: Vashti (Chapter 1)

1. In what era do the events of the book of Esther occur?
 - a. Patriarchal
 - b. Judges
 - c. Exile
 - d. First Century
2. Which nation ruled the Jews in the days of Esther? Was that nation usually conciliatory toward Judaism or antagonistic to it?
3. What was the purpose of the six-month feast that Ahasuerus threw? What sort of attitude motivates people to want to show off in front of those who have less?
4. Consider Galatians 5:24-26. What sinful attitude does arrogance incite?
5. How would it be possible to have nice things, allow others to know that, but do so without provoking them to envy?
6. The king's open-minded attitude toward others' convictions and beliefs is evidenced in his optional position on the consumption of alcohol. He seems to be nonjudgmental, although drinking alcohol was considered a pleasant virtue in such heathen kingdoms. Open-mindedness sounds good, but should we treat alcohol likewise in our own homes today? Why or why not?
7. At what point do intoxicants become dangerous (Proverbs 23:29-35)?
 - a. when on the vine
 - b. when in the cup
 - c. when tasted
 - d. when well drunk

8. Consider Romans 13:11-14. The word “sobriety” is big enough to include both an aversion to drink and a state of clear thinking. Why would the consumption of intoxicating beverages harm our faithfulness?

9. In what condition was the king when he finally called for his wife to come on the seventh day of the feast?

10. Why did he want Vashti to enter?

11. Was Vashti justified in refusing to come, rebelling against her husband’s headship? When is a wife today justified in disregarding submission to the headship of her husband (Acts 5:29)?

12. Would a husband motivated by the Holy Spirit’s revelation in Ephesians 5:22-33 subject his wife to being a spectacle as the king expected of Vashti? What references in that passage support your answer?

13. What was Memucan’s worry about the queen’s behavior?

14. What kind of influence can you have over younger wives and women by the way you treat your husband (Titus 2:3-5)?

Lesson Five: Pageant (Chapter 2)

1. Pride was not the only shortcoming of the King. His wrath also burned powerfully and led him to act capriciously. What do the following passages say in warning about wrath?

- Proverbs 21:24:
- Proverbs 25:28:
- Ecclesiastes 7:9:
- James 1:19:

2. What is a eunuch? Name another eunuch from the New Testament.

3. It is obvious then that jealousy and suspicion were common in the marriages of this era. How important is trust to a marriage and what things can do harm to that trust?

4. From what tribe of Israel did Mordecai hail? Two other members of that tribe shared the same name—one was a king and the other was an apostle. Name them. How had Mordecai's family arrived in Shushan?

5. What was Mordecai's relationship to Hadassah, that is Esther? What advantage did she have in Persia in going by a name that was not Jewish?

6. What responsibility do we have to those near us who are orphaned (James 1:27 and First Timothy 5:8)?

7. Who was Hegai? What was his opinion of Esther? Why had Esther not revealed her people or family?

8. How could God's providence have played a role in the fact that Esther seems to have found favor in the eyes of all those who could assist her?

9. It is now 479 B.C., four years since Vashti's stand as Esther gets her chance to meet the king. How impressed was Ahasuerus with her? Where does Mordecai find himself once Esther becomes queen?

10. The event that closes chapter two seems insignificant at first reading, but its inclusion in this record hints at its later importance. What did Mordecai do in service of King Ahasuerus?

11. The abiding lesson of this chapter is that sometimes divine providence brings us to the right place at the right time and gives us an opportunity that we can seize better than anyone else. Using the parable of the good Samaritan as an example (Luke 10:30-36), how could the Samaritan have failed to accept his duty in the moment of need?

12. Why do some fail to seize opportunities to do good (James 4:13-17)?

Lesson Six: Homage (Chapter 3)

1. Jewish tradition holds that Haman was a descendant of King Agag (First Samuel 15:8), but his name and those of his family are all Persian. What honor did King Ahasuerus bestow upon Haman as this chapter opens?
2. What is entailed in paying homage and why did Mordecai refuse to do so?
3. The apostles often found themselves at odds with Jewish authorities while preaching the gospel. Their responses instruct us today on dealing with situations when men are directing us to do something sinful. How did Peter and John reply when ordered not to preach Jesus anymore in Acts 4:13-20?
4. Was the church cowed into defeatism and fear by the movement against the apostles and their faith (Acts 4:23-33). How did they react? In the very next chapter, the apostles are imprisoned for the same offense. How do they answer the charges against them in Acts 5:29?
5. What happens to our faith and discipleship when we overcome threats against our lives, our livelihoods or our relationships and heed the demands of God rather than men (Matthew 10:27-39, Revelation 2:10)?

6. When Haman learned of Mordecai's apparent insult, he was filled with wrath. Why?

7. What do the following passages foretell about Haman?

- Proverbs 29:23:

- Proverbs 16:18:

8. List a few things that cause people to be sinfully proud.

- | | |
|----|----|
| a. | d. |
| b. | e. |
| c. | f. |

9. What response did Haman begin to plan because of this Jew's insult?

10. Haman's accusation was that the Jews were different and that they walked to a different beat. How has spiritual Israel –the church–inherited this characterization today (First Peter 2:9, First Peter 4:1-5)?

11. How could King Ahasuerus consent to such a plan with his own wife being a Jew?

12. How is the scheme of salvation threatened in these events?

Lesson Seven: Resignation (Chapter 4)

1. What did Mordecai do when he learned of Haman's plotting? Why had Jacob torn his clothes and put on sackcloth (Genesis 37:25-35)?
2. What else did the Jews do when they learned of the news in their own provinces? How does the degree of their mourning show a weakness in their faith in God?
3. List a few things that threaten spiritual Israel—God's church—today.
4. When America is attacked or threatened, we are often found mourning over our own earthly nation. How far can we go in our patriotic zeal without interfering with our true citizenship in heaven (First Timothy 2:1-5)?
5. What value did fasting possess? Does the New Testament command, recommend or permit fasting (First Corinthians 7:5 and Romans 14:17)?

6. What message did Mordecai send to Esther through Hathach (Esther 4:8)?

7. What kind of attitude should a Christian have toward their “kings” (First Peter 2:17)? How does this affect Christians in democracies?

8. On what basis did Esther argue against going in to speak to her husband?

9. This month-long separation of Ahasuerus and Esther was clearly the idea of the king. Today, such long separations are sometimes unavoidable, but ought always to be minimized, according to First Corinthians 7:1-5. Why?

10. Mordecai’s reply to Esther dealt with any illusions she might have possessed about her own security as the Jews faced slaughter. How much faith did he have that God would preserve his remnant and the blood line toward the son of David?

11. Mordecai makes one other suggestion about the real reason that Esther had ascended to this position. What is it?

12. What did Esther say to Mordecai as she prepared to approach the king?

13. How is this spirit required in our lives today when called to face tough challenges (Second Timothy 1:7, Romans 8:31-39)?

Lesson Eight: Petition (Chapters 5-6)

1. Esther takes the risk and approaches the king's chamber and her fears are quickly allayed. Again, she finds favor in the eyes of men. Was it luck or providence? What is the difference between luck and providence?
2. How important is it to find favor in the sight of men (First Timothy 3:7)?
3. What effect did Esther's invitations have on Haman?
4. Did Esther's invitations cure Haman of his insecurity at the sight of Mordecai? Describe his attitude.
5. Zeresh is about as valuable a counselor to her husband as was the wife of Job to hers. What is the recommendation of Zeresh and Haman's shortsighted, yes-men friends?
6. Haman was laying a trap for the destruction of his fellow man. What happened when the enemies of Jesus set traps for him in questions about taxation and adultery?
7. What is said of a person who tries to cause his neighbor to stumble or suffer loss in Proverbs 1:10-18?

8. Unlike Haman, how does Jesus instruct us to treat our enemies in Matthew 5:43-48?
9. What can people do to make themselves our enemies? Should we ever respond in kind (Romans 12:17-21)? Explain.
10. What kept the king awake that night? What was the result of insomnia?
11. What mistaken assumption did Haman make in Esther 6:6?
12. How do you think Haman felt as he was forced to reward his enemy and parade him through the streets in celebration of the king's honoring him?
13. How does Proverbs 3:31-35 describe the downfall of Haman and the elevation of Mordecai the Jew?
14. Why did Haman's friends suddenly become so pessimistic?
15. Inevitable victory is predicted for this son of God and the same is promised to Christians today. Under what conditions is this true (First John 5:1-5)?

Lesson Nine: Humiliation (Chapter 7)

1. Esther wonders if she has found favor in her husband's eyes. She was not sure because she had only seen him once now in the previous month. What must a wife do to find favor in her husband's eyes (First Corinthians 7:1-4)?

2. Marriage counselors report that most marital strife results from four areas: communication, money, sexuality and the children. Identify how each of these areas can cause one mate to lose favor with the other.

- Communication:

- Money:

- Sexuality:

- Children:

3. Read the following proverbs and identify how the wisdom of each can fortunate.

- Proverbs 12:4:

- Proverbs 14:1:

- Proverbs 19:13:
- Proverbs 31:10-31:

4. Under a special allowance in the law of Moses, a man could divorce his wife if she lost favor with him. What is the law of Christ (Matthew 19:1-9)?

5. What did King Ahasuerus stand to lose if Haman's enemies were destroyed?

6. How can all Israel be saved (cf. Romans 12:26, 1:16)?

7. Read Romans 6:1-23. What is bondage to sin like, in your own words? What is freedom from sin like, in your own words (Romans 6:17-18)?

8. How shocked do you think Haman was when he realized that Esther was a Jew? What can we learn from Haman's example?

9. What was Haman doing when he fell across the queen's couch? How did the king view it? How did Haman die?

10. Eventually, it becomes too late to seek mercy. When will it be too late for man to seek mercy from God? How do we learn the same lesson from Esau (Hebrews 12:14-17) and the Holy Spirit (Romans 2:4-6)?

Lesson Ten: Signet (Chapter 8)

1. What does it mean that the king gave Esther the house of Haman? What did Esther do with the house of Haman? What did the king give to Mordecai, once he was told that he was related to the king's wife?

2. How did Haman's pride and prejudice outlast him (cf. Exodus 20:4-6)?

3. How can the following sins outlast us and bring injury to our children?

- Forsaking the assembling of the saints:

- Drunkenness:

- Adultery:

- Greed:

4. What lessons can we learn from Esther's newfound courage (Hebrews 4:14-16, Second Timothy 1:7, Romans 8:31-39)?

5. The king seems very noble and moral now, but if the targeted people had been unrelated to his wife, what would have happened to them?

6. We often feel so close to our physical family that we put them ahead of our spiritual one and even ahead of our principles when a conflict arises. What is true of an elder who will not withdraw from his own wayward relatives (Titus 1:8) or a preacher who will not preach on the sin that children may practice (First Timothy 5:21)?

7. What is true of a mother who loves her children so dearly that every problem they face is someone else's fault (Matthew 10:37)?

8. How did the king hope to reverse the effect of Haman's scheme?

9. Were the Persians still allowed to kill Jews? What could the Jews do now by Mordecai's decree?

10. Do Christians have a right to defend themselves if physically attacked, considering Matthew 5:38-42?

11. What was the religious effect on Persia through these events?

12. Explain how these events illustrate Romans 8:28: "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose."

Lesson Eleven: Purim (Chapters 9-10)

1. Why did so many Persians hate Jews? Why do many hate them today?

2. Today's spiritual Israel is often hated in the same way, but only when she is as determined to live by faith as the ancient Jews were. Why was Jeremiah the prophet hated (Jeremiah 1:17-19)? What is our responsibility toward those who hate us (Romans 12:17-21)?

3. What are some unpleasant truths that Christians are aware of today, but which the world would rather not hear?

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4. List three things others do which might tempt the Christian to hate them.

5. How had Mordecai's fortunes turned? When will Christians get crowned (Second Timothy 4:6-8)?

6. Were the Jews motivated in this “war” by greed? The Israelites were in a similar position many years earlier when Joshua was their commander. Why did they lose the first battle of Ai (Joshua 7:1-26)?

7. Is God satisfied so long as we do the right thing, even if we have the wrong attitudes or motives (John 4:23-24, First Corinthians 13:1-3, Hebrews 4:11-13)? Explain.

8. Judging by the number of Persians killed, how great could the slaughter of the Jews had been if Esther had failed to act?

9. What did they call the new holiday created by Mordecai to celebrate their victory over Haman and the plot to annihilate them?

10. Did power go to Mordecai’s head? How did he respond?

11. What blessing does the Bible promise the humble (First Peter 5:5-7)?

12. Summarize the role of divine providence in this book.

13. How does divine providence play a role in our lives today?

Lesson Twelve: Providence

1. Read Matthew 6:25-34. How could this passage be misunderstood to encourage people to expect God to supply their needs without any human effort at all?

2. On occasion, God did miraculously provide food and shelter to his people. Consider two of those events and then identify how the recipients ruined them:

- Numbers 11:1-23:

- John 6:1-14, 22-31:

3. It appears the early Christians in Thessalonica were burdened with the thought that others should provide for them. How did Paul answer their reluctance to labor to support themselves (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15)?

4. Consider Matthew 7:7-12. How does a person ask, seek and knock when it comes to pursuing spiritual answers (cf. Acts 10:2, Acts 8:27-28, Acts 16:14)? Is a halfhearted search sufficient to arrive at truth (Hebrews 11:6)?

5. If helping oneself were necessary to enlisting the help of God, why would persistence also be a necessary ingredient (Luke 18:1-9)?

6. Protestant creeds often deny that man has any responsibility in his own salvation. How do the following passages show that God saves those who help save themselves?

- Acts 2:37-41:
- Philippians 2:12-13:
- James 2:14-26:
- Matthew 7:21-27:

7. How did Abraham abuse the axiom about helping himself on these occasions?

- Genesis 12:10-13:
- Genesis 16:1-4:
- Genesis 20:1-3:

8. How might people abuse the axiom today by helping themselves in ways that violate God's will?

Lesson Thirteen: Review

1. Why was Martin Luther critical of the book of Esther?
2. Writing of 538 B.C., Ezra alludes to a prophecy of Jeremiah, which Cyrus would fulfill (Ezra 1:1-4). The strategy of Judah's Babylonian conquerors had been to wipe out other religions, including Judaism, but Persia takes a different path. What is the major difference between Cyrus and Nebuchadnezzar (compare the decree of Cyrus with the condemnation of the Babylonian monarchs in Daniel 4:28-30, 5:18-23)?
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6. What happens to our faith and discipleship when we overcome threats against our lives, our livelihoods or our relationships and heed the demands of God rather than men (Matthew 10:27-39, Revelation 2:10)?

7. What kind of attitude should Christians have toward their “kings” (First Peter 2:17)? How does this affect Christians in democracies?
8. How does Proverbs 3:31-35 describe the downfall of Haman and the elevation of Mordecai the Jew?
9. Eventually, it becomes too late to seek mercy. When will it be too late for man to seek mercy from God? How do we learn the same lesson from Esau (Hebrews 11:14-17) and the Holy Spirit (Romans 2:4-6)?
10. What lessons can we learn from Esther’s newfound courage (Hebrews 4:14-16, Second Timothy 1:7, Romans 8:31-39)?
11. Summarize the role of divine providence in this book. How does divine providence play a role in our lives today?
12. If helping oneself were necessary to enlisting the help of God, why would persistence also be a necessary ingredient (Luke 18:1-9)?

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