Esther

Bible Stories Anthology — Esther 1–10

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

The Book Where God Is Hidden

There is a book in the Bible that never names God.

Not once in its ten chapters does the word *God* or *LORD* appear. No one is said to pray. No prophet speaks. No angel appears. No miracle happens. The word *king* appears nearly two hundred times in the English text of Esther — and the King of heaven not once.

And yet it may be the clearest picture in all of Scripture of God's hand at work behind the scenes.

A beautiful orphan girl becomes queen of the largest empire on earth. A proud official plots to wipe out every Jew in the world on a single day. An old man refuses to bow. A king cannot sleep. A gallows is built for one man and used for another. And on the very day appointed for their destruction, **"it was turned to the contrary"** (9:1).

Coincidence after coincidence after coincidence — until you realize there are no coincidences. God's name is hidden in the book of Esther, but His hand is everywhere.

The Setting

When. The king of the story is **Ahasuerus** (Hebrew *Achashverosh*), the Hebrew form of the Persian name *Khshayarsha*, known to the Greeks as **Xerxes I**, who ruled Persia from **486 to 465 B.C.** The story runs from his third year (1:3, about 483 B.C.) to his twelfth year (3:7, about 474 B.C.).

This is the same Xerxes who invaded Greece in 480 B.C. and was defeated at Salamis — the war told by the Greek historian Herodotus. Notice the gap in Esther: the great feast is in Xerxes' third year (1:3), but Esther is not brought to him until his **seventh** year (2:16). The missing years fit exactly the years he was

away fighting the Greeks. Herodotus even records a great council of Persian nobles called before the Greek campaign. Scripture does not mention the war, but the dates fit history well.

Greek sources name Xerxes' queen as **Amestris**, and they do not mention Esther. Persian kings had many wives, and the Greek historians were not interested in a Jewish queen; how Esther, Vashti and Amestris fit together is not known.

Where the Jews were. About fifty years before Xerxes, Cyrus had allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4; story 34). But many stayed behind, scattered across the Persian empire. The book of Esther is about them. In time, it falls between Ezra chapter 6 (the temple rebuilt, 516 B.C.) and Ezra chapter 7 (Ezra's return, 458 B.C.).

Where. Shushan the palace — Susa, in what is now southwestern Iran, the winter capital of the Persian kings. French archaeologists excavated it from the 1880s on and uncovered the great audience hall (*apadana*) begun by Xerxes' father Darius, with its tall columns and glazed brick walls. The book's description of the palace garden, the courts, and the coloured hangings and marble pavement (1:5-6) fits what Persian palaces were like.

The empire. "From India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces" (1:1) — the largest empire the world had yet seen, with royal roads and a famous courier system of riders on horseback (3:13; 8:10, 14).

Who.

- **Ahasuerus (Xerxes)**, king of Persia.
- **Vashti**, his queen at the start.
- **Esther (Hadassah)**, a Jewish orphan.
- **Mordecai**, her cousin, who raised her.
- **Haman the Agagite**, the king's chief minister.
- **Zeresh**, Haman's wife.
- **Hegai and Hatach**, palace officials.
- **Bigthan and Teresh**, two door-keepers who plotted against the king.

The administration. The **Mosaic Law**, among the Jews who remained scattered in the Gentile empire after the exile, in **"the times of the Gentiles"** (Luke 21:24).

God's name. The book never names God. This is so striking that the Greek translation of Esther added six long passages, including prayers by Mordecai and Esther and mentions of God, to make up for it. These additions are part of the Apocrypha, not of the Hebrew text this series follows. There is also an old Jewish tradition that the letters of God's name YHWH are hidden as an acrostic in four places in the Hebrew text (at 1:20; 5:4; 5:13; 7:7). That is an interesting curiosity, but it is not something to build on. The book's real message is plainer: God does not need to be named to be at work.

The Story, Told Faithfully

A King's Feast and a Queen Who Refused

> **Esther 1:3** *In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him:*

> **Esther 1:4** *When he shewed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty many days, even an hundred and fourscore days.*

"A feast." The Hebrew word *mishteh*, literally a *drinking*, appears about twenty times in this short book — nearly half of all its uses in the Old Testament. Esther is a book of banquets: the king's feasts (ch. 1), Esther's coronation feast (2:18), Haman's drinking with the king (3:15), Esther's two banquets (chs. 5 and 7), and the feasts of Purim (ch. 9). Many of the turning points of the story happen at a table.

"An hundred and fourscore days." Six months of display — very likely a long gathering of the empire's leaders, which some connect with the planning for the war against Greece.

After the six months came a seven-day feast for everyone in Shushan. On the seventh day, when the king was **"merry with wine"** (1:10), he sent for Queen Vashti, **"to shew the people and the princes her beauty"** (1:11).

> **Esther 1:12** *But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by his chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.*

Why did Vashti refuse? Scripture does not say. Some Jewish traditions say she was told to appear wearing only her crown; that is not in the text. What the text does show is a drunk king wanting to put his wife on display before a hall full of drunken men. Her refusal cost her the crown. On the advice of his counsellors, Ahasuerus issued a decree that **"every man should bear rule in his own house"** (1:22), and Vashti was removed.

The world's most powerful man could not get his own wife to come to a party. The book of Esther has a quiet sense of humour about the pride of kings.

The Orphan Girl

> **Esther 2:5** *Now in Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite;*
>
> **Esther 2:6** *Who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away.*
>
> **Esther 2:7** *And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful; whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter.*

"A certain Jew." The word *Jew* (*Yehudi*) originally meant a man of Judah. After the exile it came to mean any Israelite. Mordecai was of the tribe of Benjamin — and here is the first great clue in the book.

"The son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite." *Kish* was the name of King Saul's father (1 Samuel 9:1-2), and *Shimei* was the name of a Benjamite of Saul's house who cursed David (2 Samuel 16:5). Whether these are Mordecai's literal ancestors or the family names repeated in his line, the writer wants us to see that Mordecai belongs to the family of **Saul**. Keep that in mind when we meet Haman.

"Who had been carried away." If this refers to Mordecai himself, he would have been carried away in 597 B.C. and be well over a hundred years old in Xerxes' day. More likely, *who* refers to the last name before it — Kish, Mordecai's great-grandfather — and the verse means that Mordecai's family had been among the captives taken with Jeconiah.

“Mordecai.” A Babylonian name formed from the name of the god **Marduk**. A clay tablet from Persepolis lists an official named *Marduka* at Susa in the early reign of Xerxes. He may be our Mordecai — or someone else with a common name. It cannot be proved either way.

“Hadassah, that is, Esther.” *Hadassah* is Hebrew for **myrtle**, a fragrant evergreen. *Esther* is probably from the Persian word for **star** (*stara*), though some connect it with the Babylonian goddess Ishtar. Like Daniel and his friends (story 33), she lived with two names.

“For she had neither father nor mother.” An orphan, raised by her older cousin as his own daughter. From the very beginning, the heroine of this book had nothing in this world to protect her.

“The maid was fair and beautiful.” Literally, *beautiful of form and good of appearance*.

Taken to the Palace

> **Esther 2:8** *So it came to pass, when the king’s commandment and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the palace, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was brought also unto the king’s house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women.*

“Esther was brought also.” The verb is passive. Esther did not enter a beauty contest. Young women were gathered from across the empire by royal order, and they did not have a choice. Each would spend one night with the king, and afterward live as a concubine in the second house of the women, never to go to him again unless he called her by name (2:14). It was a harem. Scripture records it plainly and does not call it good.

> **Esther 2:10** *Esther had not shewed her people nor her kindred: for Mordecai had charged her that she should not shew it.*

“Esther had not shewed her people.” On Mordecai’s advice, she kept her Jewish identity hidden. Scripture does not say whether this was wise; it simply reports it — and it turns out to matter greatly later.

“Twelve months” of preparation followed: six months with oil of myrrh and six with sweet odours (2:12). Esther found favour with everyone who saw her, and when her turn came, she asked for nothing beyond what Hegai the keeper advised.

> **Esther 2:17** *And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.*

The orphan girl was now queen of Persia.

Did Esther do right to become the wife of a pagan king, to eat at his table, to hide that she was a Jew? The book never tells us. It does not hold her up as a perfect example; it shows a young woman caught in a situation she did not choose, and a God who was using it. God works through real people in real situations — including ones that are far from ideal.

A Plot Overheard

> **Esther 2:21** *In those days, while Mordecai sat in the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigthan and Teresh, of those which kept the door, were wroth, and sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus.*
>
> **Esther 2:22** *And the thing was known to Mordecai, who told it unto Esther the queen; and Esther certified the king thereof in Mordecai's name.*

"Sat in the king's gate." The gate was where officials did business; Mordecai likely held some position at court.

Two door-keepers plotted to kill the king. Mordecai heard of it, told Esther, and Esther told the king **"in Mordecai's name."** The two were hanged, and the matter was written **"in the book of the chronicles before the king"** (2:23).

And then — nothing happened. Mordecai was not rewarded. The king forgot. It seems like a loose end. It is not. It is a seed planted, waiting for its hour.

Haman the Agagite

> **Esther 3:1** *After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him.*
>
> **Esther 3:2** *And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and reverenced Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence.*

"Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite." Here is the second great clue. **Agag** was the king of the **Amalekites** in the days of King Saul.

The Amalekites were the first nation to attack Israel after the Exodus, falling on the weak and weary at the rear of the march (Deuteronomy 25:17-18). God declared: **"the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation"** (Exodus 17:16). Centuries later, God sent **Saul, the son of Kish,** to destroy Amalek. Saul disobeyed: he spared **Agag** the king and kept the best of the spoil for himself (1 Samuel 15:8-9). For that disobedience Saul lost his kingdom.

Now, five hundred years later, in the palace of Persia, the descendant of Kish faces the Agagite. The old war has come back. Whether "Agagite" means Haman was a literal descendant of King Agag, or simply that he belonged to that hated people, is debated; either way, the writer wants us to hear the echo. Saul's unfinished business is about to be finished.

"But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence." Persians commonly bowed or prostrated themselves before superiors (Herodotus describes it in *Histories* 1.134). Bowing to a man was not in itself forbidden to a Jew; Abraham bowed to the Hittites (Genesis 23:7), and David bowed to Saul (1 Samuel 24:8). Why then would Mordecai not bow? The text gives one clue: **"he had told them that he was a Jew"** (3:4). As this series understands it, the reason was either that the honour Haman demanded went beyond respect toward something like worship, or that a Jew of Saul's house would not bow to an Amalekite, the people God had declared war upon. Scripture does not settle which.

> **Esther 3:5** *And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath.*

> **Esther 3:6** *And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had shewed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai.*

"Thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone." Killing one man was beneath him. Haman's rage was so great that he decided to destroy **"all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom."** One man's refusal to bow brought on a plan of genocide.

The Lot Is Cast

> **Esther 3:7** *In the first month, that is, the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar.*

"Pur, that is, the lot." *Pur* is a Babylonian-Persian word for a lot or die; archaeologists have found a clay cube from Assyria inscribed as a *puru*, used for casting lots. Haman cast lots to find a lucky day for his massacre, the way pagans consulted omens.

"In the first month." The lots were cast in **Nisan**, the month of **Passover** — the month of Israel's great deliverance from Egypt.

"To the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar." The lot fell on a day nearly **eleven months** away. Haman's own superstition gave the Jews almost a year to prepare and gave God time to turn everything around. Scripture says elsewhere: **"The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD"** (Proverbs 16:33). The book never says it — but this is the hand of God.

> **Esther 3:8** *And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them.*
>
> **Esther 3:9** *If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries.*

"A certain people scattered abroad." Notice Haman never names them. He tells part of the truth (their laws were different) and adds a lie (they do not keep the king's laws). It is the oldest pattern of hatred: *those people are different, and they are dangerous.*

"Ten thousand talents of silver." An enormous sum — around 375 tons of silver. Herodotus says the annual tribute of the whole Persian empire under Darius was about 14,560 talents (*Histories* 3.95). Haman offered roughly two-thirds of a year's revenue for the empire — presumably from his own fortune and from the plunder of the Jews.

The king gave Haman his signet ring and said, *the silver is yours, and the people too; do with them as you please* (3:10-11). He did not even ask who the people were.

> **Esther 3:13** *And the letters were sent by posts into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey.*

"To destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish." Three verbs piled up, a figure called **synonymia** — words of similar meaning stacked to make the meaning total. Men, women and children; young and old; on one day.

The date of the decree. It was written on **"the thirteenth day of the first month"** (3:12) — the day before Passover. The Jews of the empire would learn, on the eve of the feast celebrating their deliverance from Egypt, that they had been sentenced to death.

> **Esther 3:15** *The posts went out, being hastened by the king's commandment, and the decree was given in Shushan the palace. And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed.*

"The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed." One of the most chilling sentences in the Bible. Two men drinking calmly in the palace, having just signed away a whole people; and outside, a city in confusion. This is a figure called **antithesis**, two opposite pictures set side by side.

For Such a Time as This

> **Esther 4:1** *When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry;*

"Rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes." The ancient signs of grief and mourning (Genesis 37:34; Jonah 3:6). Across every province, the Jews did the same: **"there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes"** (4:3). Fasting in Scripture goes with prayer (Daniel 9:3). The book does not say they prayed. It does not need to.

Esther, inside the palace, did not know about the decree. Mordecai sent her a copy and charged her to go to the king and plead for her people. She sent back a reply:

> **Esther 4:11** *All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.*

"Whosoever … shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death." Herodotus confirms that Persian kings could not be approached without being announced (*Histories* 1.99; 3.118). Esther had not been called in thirty days. Perhaps she had fallen out of favour. To go uninvited was to gamble her life on the king's mood.

Mordecai's answer is the centre of the book:

> **Esther 4:13** *Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews.*
>
> **Esther 4:14** *For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*

Take it phrase by phrase.

“Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king’s house.” *Your crown will not save you. The decree covers every Jew, and you are one.*

“If thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time.” Literally, *if you are completely silent*. The Hebrew doubles the verb for emphasis.

“Then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place.” Mordecai was certain that the Jews would not be destroyed. Why? He does not say. But behind his words stand all of God’s promises to Abraham and to Israel — that the nation would never cease (Jeremiah 31:35-36), and that the Messiah would come from them. *From another place* is as close as the book comes to naming God. As this series understands it, Mordecai was speaking of God without using His name, as the whole book does.

“But thou and thy father’s house shall be destroyed.” If she refused her part, God would still save His people — but she would lose her place in His plan.

“And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” A question that answers itself, a figure called **erotesis**. *Why do you think an orphan Jewish girl became queen of Persia? Maybe it was for this very moment.* Mordecai saw what Esther could not see from inside the palace: everything that had happened to her — the loss of her parents, the gathering of the girls, the favour she found, the crown — had been leading to this.

> **Esther 4:16** *Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.*

“Fast ye for me.” Three days and nights of fasting, the whole Jewish community of Shushan joining her. In Scripture, fasting is coupled with seeking God; the book’s silence about prayer cannot hide what they were doing.

“And so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law.” She would break the law of Persia to save her people.

“And if I perish, I perish.” These four words belong beside *“But if not”* (Daniel 3:18; story 33). Esther did not know how it would end. She went anyway. That is courage: not the absence of fear — she had three days to feel it — but obedience in spite of it.

The Golden Sceptre

> **Esther 5:1** *Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king’s house, over against the king’s house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the gate of the house.*
>
> **Esther 5:2** *And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre.*

“On the third day.” After three days of fasting, she went.

“She obtained favour in his sight.” The Hebrew says she *lifted up* or *carried* favour; it happened to her, as it had all through her life (2:9, 15, 17). Behind it, as this series understands it, was the One who turns

the king's heart: **"The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will"** (Proverbs 21:1).

"The golden sceptre." Holding out the sceptre meant *you may live; you may approach.* Esther touched the top of it.

"Unto the half of the kingdom." The king said, **"What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom"** (5:3). This was a royal idiom, a generous way of saying *anything within reason* — not a literal offer. Herod made the same offer to his stepdaughter (Mark 6:23).

Esther did not ask at once. She invited the king and Haman to a banquet. At the banquet she asked them to come to a second banquet the next day. Why the delay? Scripture does not say. It may have been wisdom, or fear, or simply waiting for the right moment. But that one-day delay gave room for the night that changed everything.

Haman's Gallows

Haman left the first banquet **"joyful and with a glad heart"** (5:9) — and then saw Mordecai in the gate, who **"stood not up, nor moved for him."** At home, he boasted to his wife and friends of his riches, his sons, his promotion, and his private invitation to the queen's banquet, and then said:

> **Esther 5:13** *Yet all this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.*

"All this availeth me nothing." Everything in the world, and one man's refusal to bow spoiled it all. Pride is never satisfied.

> **Esther 5:14** *Then said Zeresh his wife and all his friends unto him, Let a gallows be made of fifty cubits high, and to morrow speak thou unto the king that Mordecai may be hanged thereon: then go thou in merrily with the king unto the banquet. And the thing pleased Haman; and he caused the gallows to be made.*

"A gallows be made of fifty cubits high." About 75 feet. The Hebrew word is simply *'ets*, **tree** or **wood**. It was most likely a tall stake for impaling or hanging a body on public display — a Persian practice; Herodotus says Darius impaled three thousand men of Babylon after a revolt (*Histories* 3.159). Fifty cubits is so tall that it was meant to be seen across the city. It was probably built on Haman's own house (7:9).

A Sleepless Night

> **Esther 6:1** *On that night could not the king sleep, and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king.*

Here is the hinge on which the whole book turns.

"On that night could not the king sleep." Literally, *the king's sleep fled.* Why that night, of all nights? The text does not say. The book does not say *God kept him awake.* But the reader knows.

"He commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles." Of all the ways to cure sleeplessness — music, wine, the women of the palace — he chose the dullest: the royal records. And of all the years

of records, the servant read the very passage about **Mordecai** saving the king's life five years earlier (6:2).

> **Esther 6:3** *And the king said, What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this? Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, There is nothing done for him.*

"There is nothing done for him." The forgotten loose end from chapter 2 now became the most important fact in the empire.

And at that exact moment — early in the morning — who should be standing in the outer court? **Haman**, who had come to ask the king's permission to hang Mordecai on the gallows he had built that night (6:4).

The Man Whom the King Delighteth to Honour

> **Esther 6:6** *So Haman came in. And the king said unto him, What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour? Now Haman thought in his heart, To whom would the king delight to do honour more than to myself?*

Here is **irony** at its sharpest: the reader knows something the character does not. The king was thinking of Mordecai. Haman, in his pride, thought, *Who else could it be but me?*

So Haman described his own dream of honour: the king's own robe, the king's own horse with the royal crown on its head, one of the king's most noble princes leading him through the streets crying, *"Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour"* (6:7-9).

> **Esther 6:10** *Then the king said to Haman, Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew, that sitteth at the king's gate: let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken.*

"Do even so to Mordecai the Jew." The king now knew Mordecai was a Jew — and still did not connect him with the decree against the Jews.

Haman had to lead his enemy through the streets of Shushan on the king's horse, crying out his praise. Then he **"hasted to his house mourning, and having his head covered"** (6:12).

> **Esther 6:13** *And Haman told Zeresh his wife and all his friends every thing that had befallen him. Then said his wise men and Zeresh his wife unto him, If Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him.*

"If Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him." Even Haman's wife and advisers saw it. The Jews had a history: nations that rose against them fell. They did not say why. They did not need to.

The Second Banquet

While they were still talking, the king's servants arrived to hurry Haman to Esther's banquet (6:14). There, the king asked a third time what her request was.

> **Esther 7:3** *Then Esther the queen answered and said, If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request:*
> **Esther 7:4** *For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my tongue, although the enemy could not countervail the king's damage.*

"Let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request." At last Esther revealed who she was. She identified herself with her people. Her life and theirs were one.

"For we are sold." She used the very words of Haman's bargain (3:9) and of his decree (3:13): *to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish.*

> **Esther 7:5** *Then the king Ahasuerus answered and said unto Esther the queen, Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?*
> **Esther 7:6** *And Esther said, The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman. Then Haman was afraid before the king and the queen.*

"This wicked Haman." One sentence, and the most powerful man in the empire after the king was finished.

The king went out into the palace garden in his fury. Haman, left behind, threw himself on Esther's couch to beg for his life — and the king returned at that moment and took it as an assault on the queen (7:7-8). **"As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face"** (7:8) — the sign of a condemned man.

> **Esther 7:9** *And Harbonah, one of the chamberlains, said before the king, Behold also, the gallows fifty cubits high, which Haman had made for Mordecai, who had spoken good for the king, standeth in the house of Haman. Then the king said, Hang him thereon.*
> **Esther 7:10** *So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then was the king's wrath pacified.*

"Hang him thereon." Haman died on the gallows he built for Mordecai. **"He made a pit, and digged it, and is fallen into the ditch which he made"** (Psalm 7:15; story 34). **"Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein"** (Proverbs 26:27). **"Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap"** (Galatians 6:7).

A Law That Could Not Be Changed

Haman was dead, but his decree was not. **"The writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse"** (8:8; see story 34). The Jews were still sentenced to die on the thirteenth of Adar.

Esther went in to the king again, uninvited, and **"fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears"** (8:3). Again the sceptre was held out. The king could not cancel the old law, but he could issue a new one. He gave Mordecai his signet ring, and Mordecai wrote a second decree:

> **Esther 8:11** *Wherein the king granted the Jews which were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the power of*

> *the people and province that would assault them, both little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey,*

The new decree gave the Jews the right **"to stand for their life"** — to defend themselves against anyone who attacked them. Notice the same three verbs as Haman's decree, *to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish*, now turned back against the attackers. The decree was carried by riders **"riders on mules, camels, and young dromedaries"** (8:10), across the whole empire.

> **Esther 8:15** *And Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a garment of fine linen and purple: and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad.*
> **Esther 8:16** *The Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour.*

"Royal apparel of blue and white." The royal colours of Persia. Mordecai went in sackcloth to the king's gate in chapter 4; he came out in royal robes and a gold crown in chapter 8.

> **Esther 8:17** *And in every province, and in every city, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a good day. And many of the people of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews fell upon them.*

"Many of the people of the land became Jews." Gentiles turned to the God of Israel — though the book, as always, does not name Him.

It Was Turned to the Contrary

> **Esther 9:1** *Now in the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's commandment and his decree drew near to be put in execution, in the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over them, (though it was turned to the contrary, that the Jews had rule over them that hated them;)*

"It was turned to the contrary." In Hebrew, *venahafoch hu* — "and it was overturned." This phrase is the key to the whole book. Everything is reversed:

- Haman built a gallows for Mordecai; Haman hanged on it.
- Haman wanted honour; he had to give it to Mordecai.
- Mordecai wore sackcloth; he wore royal robes.
- The Jews were to be destroyed; their enemies were destroyed.
- The day of death became a day of feasting.

This kind of sudden reversal is called **peripeteia** by students of literature. In Scripture it is the fingerprint of God. **"He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree"** (Luke 1:52).

"The Jews had rule over them that hated them." On the thirteenth of Adar, the Jews gathered in their cities **"to lay hand on such as sought their hurt"** (9:2). This was not a war of revenge against innocent people. Those who died were those who took up Haman's decree and came to kill the Jews. Many officials of the provinces helped the Jews, **"because the fear of Mordecai fell upon them"** (9:3).

The fighting was real and the numbers were large: five hundred men in Shushan the palace on the first day (9:6), three hundred more on the second (9:15), and **seventy-five thousand** across the provinces (9:16). The Bible states these numbers plainly, and this series does the same. It was a day of self-defence against a planned extermination — men who chose to attack the Jews on the day the law allowed it.

Esther asked the king for a second day of defence in Shushan, and for the bodies of Haman's ten sons, already killed, to be hanged on display (9:13-14). This is hard to read. The book records it; it does not praise it or explain it. As this series understands it, the second day suggests that enemies in the capital were still active; the display of the bodies was a public warning in the Persian manner. Readers should not make this the pattern for believers today — under grace, **"Avenge not yourselves"** (Romans 12:19).

"But on the spoil laid they not their hand." This phrase is repeated **three times** (9:10, 15, 16). The decree allowed the Jews to take the plunder (8:11). They refused. Why mention it three times? Remember Saul. He had been commanded to destroy Amalek and take nothing, and he took the spoil — and lost his kingdom (1 Samuel 15:9, 19). Now, in the final battle between the house of Kish and the house of Agag, the Jews did what Saul did not. They fought only to defend their lives, and took nothing for themselves.

Purim

> **Esther 9:20** *And Mordecai wrote these things, and sent letters unto all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, both nigh and far,*
>
> **Esther 9:21** *To stablish this among them, that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly,*
>
> **Esther 9:22** *As the days wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day: that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.*

"Purim." Named for *pur*, the lot Haman cast (9:24-26). The very lot he used to choose the day of destruction gave its name to the feast of deliverance.

"From sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day." Reversal again.

"Sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor." Jews keep Purim to this day, on the 14th of Adar (the 15th in Shushan, 9:18-19, and by later Jewish custom in other walled cities), reading the book of Esther aloud, sharing food, and giving to the poor. It is the only biblical feast not given in the Law of Moses.

Mordecai the Jew

> **Esther 10:3** *For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed.*

The book ends as it began — with the king — but now the king's second is a Jew, **"seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed."** The orphan's guardian, who sat in sackcloth at the gate, ended his life as the greatest man in the empire after Ahasuerus.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The seed preserved. God promised that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15), that through Abraham's seed all nations would be blessed (Genesis 22:18), and that the

Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah and the house of David (Genesis 49:10; 2 Samuel 7:12-13). If Haman had succeeded, there would have been no Jewish people for the Messiah to be born from. Behind Haman, as this series understands it, stood the same adversary who has always tried to destroy the line of the promise — at the Flood, in Egypt, through Herod at Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16; Revelation 12:4). The book of Esther shows God guarding the line that leads to Christ, without His name ever being spoken.

The intercessor who risked her life. Esther went before the throne, uninvited, at the risk of her life, to plead for her condemned people. She identified herself with them: *my life … and my people.* Jesus Christ did more. He did not risk death; he went into it, **"who gave himself a ransom for all"** (1 Timothy 2:6). Then God raised him from the dead and he ascended to God's right hand, **"who also maketh intercession for us"** (Romans 8:34); **"he ever liveth to make intercession for them"** (Hebrews 7:25). Esther pleaded once; he pleads continually.

A law that could not be cancelled. Haman's decree could not be revoked. A second law had to be written to overcome it. The law of sin and death stood against all mankind, and it could not simply be erased. God wrote a new law: **"For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death"** (Romans 8:2).

Two trees. Haman died on a tree for his own sin, a cursed man. Jesus died on a tree for ours: **"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree"** (Galatians 3:13). **"Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree"** (1 Peter 2:24). The contrast is this series' observation; Scripture does not link Haman and the cross.

From sackcloth to the king's right hand. Mordecai went from mourning at the gate to royal robes, second only to the king. Jesus Christ went from the cross and the grave to the right hand of God: **"Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name"** (Philippians 2:9).

To the Grace Administration

God at work when He seems silent. Many believers go through seasons when God seems absent: no voice, no sign, no miracle. Esther teaches that God is at work in the silence. **"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose"** (Romans 8:28). He **"worketh all things after the counsel of his own will"** (Ephesians 1:11).

For such a time as this. Every believer has a place, a time, and opportunities that no one else has. **"See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil"** (Ephesians 5:15-16). The question Mordecai asked Esther can be asked of every believer: *who knows whether you are here for such a time as this?*

Bold access — without the risk. Esther went before the throne not knowing whether she would live. The believer today has no such fear: **"For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father"** (Ephesians 2:18), and **"Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need"** (Hebrews 4:16). The sceptre is always held out to those who come in Christ's name.

Pride goes before a fall. "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18). Haman had everything and said, *All this availeth me nothing*. **"God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble"** (James 4:6).

Our real enemy. Behind Haman stood a greater enemy. **"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world"** (Ephesians 6:12). Our warfare is not with swords: **"Recompense to no man evil for evil"** (Romans 12:17).

Speak up. "If thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time ..." Silence in the face of evil is a choice too.

To the Topic of Providence

- **God's hand is often hidden** — never named, everywhere present.
- **God uses ordinary events** — a party, a beauty search, a sleepless night, a dull book.
- **God's timing is exact** — the lot, the delay, the night, the hour Haman arrived.
- **God works through imperfect people.**
- **God turns things to the contrary.**
- **God's promises cannot be cancelled by any decree.**
- **God places His people "for such a time as this."**
- **God invites us to act** — Esther still had to go in.

The Main Takeaway

When Ahasuerus king of Persia removed Queen Vashti, the Jewish orphan Esther, raised by her cousin Mordecai of the house of Kish, was taken into the palace and made queen without revealing her people; when Haman the Agagite, the king's chief minister, was enraged that Mordecai would not bow to him, he cast the lot (pur) and obtained a decree, sealed with the king's ring and impossible to reverse, to destroy every Jew in the empire on the thirteenth day of Adar; Mordecai told Esther, "who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" and she answered, "I will go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish"; the king held out the golden sceptre; on the night between her two banquets "could not the king sleep," and the chronicles read to him told how Mordecai had saved his life and never been rewarded, so that Haman had to honour the man he had come to hang; at the second banquet Esther revealed her people and named "this wicked Haman," who was hanged on the gallows he had built for Mordecai; a second decree let the Jews defend their lives, and on the day appointed for their destruction "it was turned to the contrary," which the Jews still remember as Purim. God is not named once in the book of Esther, yet His hand directs every turn — and He still places His people "for such a time as this."

- **God is at work even when He is silent.**
- **There are no accidents in God's plan.**
- **Courage obeys without knowing the outcome** — "if I perish, I perish."
- **Speak up when silence would let evil win.**
- **Pride falls into its own pit.**
- **God keeps His promises,** and nothing can cancel them.

For Our Learning — The People

- **Ahasuerus (Xerxes I).** King of Persia (486–465 B.C.), ruler of 127 provinces.
- **Vashti.** Queen who refused to appear at the king's feast and was removed.
- **Esther (Hadassah).** "Star"/"Myrtle." Jewish orphan who became queen and saved her people.
- **Mordecai.** Benjamite of the family of Kish, Esther's cousin and guardian; refused to bow to Haman; became second to the king.
- **Abihail.** Esther's father, Mordecai's uncle (2:15).
- **Haman.** Son of Hammedatha the Agagite; chief minister; plotted to destroy the Jews; hanged on his own gallows.
- **Zeresh.** Haman's wife, who advised the gallows and later foresaw his fall.
- **Haman's ten sons.** Killed in the fighting (9:7-10).
- **Hegai.** Keeper of the women (2:8).
- **Hatach.** Chamberlain who carried messages between Esther and Mordecai (4:5).
- **Harbonah.** Chamberlain who mentioned the gallows (7:9).
- **Bigthan and Teresh.** Door-keepers who plotted against the king (2:21).
- **Memucan.** Counsellor who advised removing Vashti (1:16).

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Royal feasts** lasting days or months.
- **Royal harems** — young women gathered by decree; a year of beauty preparation.
- **Sitting in the king's gate** — the place of officials and business.
- **Royal chronicles** — written records of the king's reign.
- **Prostration** before superiors (Herodotus 1.134).
- **Casting lots (pur)** to choose lucky days.
- **The king's signet ring** — authority to issue decrees.
- **Irrevocable Persian law** (8:8).
- **Royal couriers** on horses, mules and camels.
- **Sackcloth and ashes** — signs of mourning.
- **Fasting** with mourning and seeking God.
- **Approaching the king only when summoned;** the golden sceptre as a sign of pardon.
- **"To the half of the kingdom"** — a royal idiom of generosity.
- **Covering the face** of a condemned man.
- **Impaling or hanging** bodies on high stakes.
- **Royal robes of blue and white;** riding the king's horse as the highest honour.
- **Purim** — the feast of lots, kept on the 14th and 15th of Adar.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Synonymia (words of like meaning)** — "to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish" (3:13), repeated in 7:4 and turned back in 8:11.
- **Antithesis (contrast)** — "the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed" (3:15).
- **Erotesis (rhetorical question)** — "who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (4:14).
- **Polyptoton (the same word in different forms)** — "if thou altogether holdest thy peace" (4:14), literally "if silent you are silent."
- **Idiom** — "to the half of the kingdom" (5:3, 6; 7:2), meaning anything within reason.
- **Irony** — "To whom would the king delight to do honour more than to myself?" (6:6).
- **Repetition** — "on the spoil laid they not their hand" (9:10, 15, 16).
- **Peripeteia (reversal)** — "it was turned to the contrary" (9:1).
- **Idiom** — "could not the king sleep" (6:1), literally "the king's sleep fled."

What the Bible Actually Says

- **God is never named** in the book of Esther.
- **Vashti refused** to appear before the king's drunken guests.
- **Esther was an orphan** raised by her cousin Mordecai.
- **Esther was taken** into the king's house and made queen.
- **She hid that she was a Jew** on Mordecai's advice.
- **Mordecai saved the king's life** and was not rewarded at first.
- **Haman was an Agagite;** Mordecai was of the family of Kish.
- **Mordecai would not bow** to Haman.
- **Haman cast the lot** and obtained a decree to destroy all the Jews.
- **Esther risked her life** to go before the king — "if I perish, I perish."
- **The king could not sleep** and read of Mordecai's deed.
- **Haman was hanged on his own gallows.**
- **A second decree let the Jews defend themselves.**
- **The Jews took no spoil.**
- **Purim was established** to remember the deliverance.
- **Mordecai became second to the king.**

God's Will and Intent

- **God preserves His people** and keeps His promises.
- **God works through ordinary events and ordinary people.**
- **God places His people where they are needed,** "for such a time as this."
- **God turns the plans of the wicked back on themselves.**
- **God exalts the humble and brings down the proud.**
- **God guarded the line through which the Messiah would come.**

- **God gave His Son, Jesus Christ,** who died on the tree for our sins, was raised from the dead, and ascended to God's right hand, where he ever lives to make intercession for us.