

# Esther, the Story of Providence

Text: Esther 4

The book of Esther opens by describing the expansive Persian kingdom of Ahasuerus, whose Greek name is Xerxes. The kingdom stretched from Ethiopia to the edges of India, all the way from modern Libya to Pakistan. He is not only the son of Darius, he is the grandson of Cyrus the Great, the Persian ruler who decreed that the Jews could go back to their land after 70 years of captivity. That's how the book of Esther begins.

The Persians had conquered the Babylonian-Chaldean Empire in 539 BC, and had settled into domination in the Middle Eastern world, lasting for 200 years before they were replaced by the Greeks, who were later replaced by the Romans. Back in 550 BC, the regions of Greece had been conquered by Ahasuerus' father, Darius. But in 490 BC the Athenians defeated Darius' armies at the famous Battle of Marathon. This is when the legendary Pheidippides supposedly ran the nearly 26 miles from Marathon to Athens to announce; "Oh joy! We win!" then dies from exhaustion. Darius is enraged and returns home to plan vengeance on the Greeks, but dies before he can make his attempt. In 486 BC, his son Xerxes (Ahasuerus) rises to power carrying the vengeance of his father.

Ahasuerus assembles 250,000 soldiers to take on Greece. He calls for a meeting of his Persian confederation back to Shushan (Esther 1:5). It was a six-month planning meeting culminating with a final seven-day drunken orgy. The final day he gives an order spoken of in Esther 1:11: "To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to shew the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on." She refused and he was livid. She was formally deposed. Some historians believe Vashti was expecting Artaxerxes, the future king and did not want to be on parade before these rude men.

It was four years (483 or 482 BC - 479 or 478 BC) before Ahasuerus selects a new queen, because he spent the next two years unsuccessfully trying to defeat the Greeks. There are some very famous battles fought during this time. There was the Battle of Thermopylae, where the 300 Spartans made one of the most courageous last stand battles of history. Then there was the Battle of Salamis, where the Persian navy is completely obliterated by the Greeks. So, he returns home to Shushan for some diversion - the selecting of a new queen.

There are two books in the Bible that do not mention the name of God: the Song of Solomon and Esther. Although God's name is not mentioned, it is very apparent that God's providence is so apparent, that He is seen as mighty and sovereign over all. God's fingerprints are all over this book! Proverbs 19:21: "There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand." Psalm 115:3: "But our God is in the heavens: He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased."

## 1. THE CORONATION OF QUEEN ESTHER

The next step in this story of providence is the selection of the queen. The population of the Persian Empire is 50 million. Imagine how many women to choose from! As officials combed the countryside, Josephus, the historian says there were 400 virgins who were taken to the palace for the runoff beauty contest. Esther becomes "Miss Persia" and finally queen (Esther 2:15-17). There is a joke that has a husband asking his wife, "Why did God make you so beautiful, but yet so dumb?" She replied, "Honey, God made me beautiful so that you would love me and He made me dumb so I could love you." This is only a joke, but we can certainly say that Esther was aesthetically pleasing to the eye, but also a brilliant young lady. In reality, God doesn't

put the value of a person on their appearance. God says in Proverbs 31:30, "Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised." God puts the premium on who a person is on the inside. I Peter 3:3 and 4 points out that there is hidden beauty that comes from inward holiness. Esther's beauty could have been something that even wicked King Ahasuerus did not recognize, and that is the beauty of holiness (Psalm 29:2).

## 2. THE LOT IS CAST

In Esther 3:2 Mordecai refused to bow before Haman, King Ahasuerus' new best friend. Haman is now an advanced prince. We see in Scripture that the kings of Israel were honored with a tributary bow (II Samuel 14:4; I Kings 1:16). The problem for Mordecai is that when one bows before royalty in Persia this means recognition is ascribed to them as a divine being. Therefore, Haman cannot and will not bow to Mordecai. Haman's response is out-of-control anger. Then he assigns the astrologers and magicians to cast the lot or "*Pur*" to determine the day of the year that destruction of the Jewish people would begin. The anti-Semite Haman is not familiar with Prov. 16:33: "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof *is* of the LORD."

## 3. THE CHOSEN FAST

When Mordecai and the Jewish citizenry heard that on a certain day the massacre of the Jews would begin, they mourned in sackcloth and ashes with fasting. Mordecai sent this most famous word to Esther in 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?" Esther's response was classic. 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." Isaiah 58: 6-12 explains the power of God's chosen fast.

## 4. ESTHER'S FIRST BANQUET

Esther 5:1-8

Courageous Esther now comes before the king in jeopardy of her life. The king accepts her and is so pleased with her that he promises her half the kingdom. She simply requests audience with him and Haman at a banquet she will prepare. At the banquet the king again promises her anything. Her only request is that the king and Haman come once more to another banquet. When Haman returns home, he is filled with pride, bragging to his wife and friends of his importance (Esther 5:11). Haman is the perfect commentary of Proverbs 16:18, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." He tells his family and friends that all of his promotion means nothing to him as long as Mordecai continues to humiliate him at the king's gate. So from his wife's advice, Haman ordered the construction of a gallows 75 feet high to hang Mordecai (Esther 5:14).

## 5. MORDECAI IS HONORED

Esther 6

The king could not sleep so he had the chronicles of the kingdom read to him. These were records of events done during the days of his reign. Then the most marvelous thing happened. He discovers that two of his chamberlains had planned his assassination, but Mordecai was the one who thwarted their plan and saved King

Ahasuerus' life (Esther 6:1-3; Esther 2:21-23). So the king called his "trustworthy" friend Haman to come and help him determine what should be done for a man that the king wanted to honor. Haman did not hold back what he thought the king should do (no doubt thinking it was himself). He suggested the most extravagant means, even to using the king's apparel and crown and riding horseback through the street of the city to show all that this is the man the king wants to honor. Can you imagine the deep humiliation to discover it was Mordecai? Even his wife knew his proverbial "goose was cooked" (Esther 6:13).

## 6. ESTHER'S SECOND BANQUET

### Esther 7

The king and Haman now come to Esther's second banquet (Esther 7:1). Again Esther is promised by Ahasuerus anything up to half the kingdom (Esther 7:2). Then the tables are turned as Esther requests the life of herself and all her people and then she reveals to the king the wicked Haman's "Purim plot", i.e., to destroy the Jewish people (Esther 7:3-6). Haman begs for his life, but to no avail, he ends up at the end of the noose he had planned for Mordecai (Esther 7:10).

## 7. THE HAPPY ENDING

### Esther 8-10

In the narrative of these chapters, Mordecai takes the ring and authority that had been Haman's and Esther 9:1 describes the outcome: "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)."

By the law of Medes and Persians the king's decree could not be revoked, but another law ordained by the king could be made to neutralize the effect of the first decree. The Jews could now take up arms to defend themselves (Esther 8:11). Seventy-five thousand enemies of Israel were destroyed and Haman's ten sons died on the same gallows their father died upon (Esther 9:13 and 16). The genocide plan failed. God protected His people.

And from India to Ethiopia, in all 127 provinces, peace and truth was granted to all Jewish people by order of her Majesty, Queen Esther in the second letter of Purim! (Esther 9:26-30). Concluding thought: Esther 8:16, 17.

-Pastor Pope-