

Commentary

Mordecai is distraught when he hears the news, perhaps feeling partly responsible. All the rest of the Jews likewise fasted, wept and lamented; a phrase reminiscent of Joel 2:12-14 where God's people are told to tear their hearts not just their clothes and return to the Lord. "Who knows whether He will not turn and relent and leave a blessing behind him...?"

Esther hears that Mordecai is upset so tries to cheer him up but he won't be comforted. He explains why he's so sad and tells her to plead the king for the people's lives. Esther reminds him that anyone who walks in to see the king without an invite is immediately executed. And Esther hasn't been called in by her husband for a month, so she's presumably fallen out of favour with him.

Mordecai's reply is fascinating. He tells Esther she won't be safe from this genocide inside the palace (is he threatening to reveal her Jewish identity?!) and that if she doesn't do it, even if the rest of the Jews survive, she won't (again, another threat?!). Mordecai's character continues to be a mixed bag!

But there are signs of growth in him. He exhibits enormous amounts of faith here. We would expect him to say, "If you keep silent at this time... we're all doomed!" But instead he says, "If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place." Now that is confidence that God will act to keep His promises! God will definitely save them and Mordecai reckons He might do it through Esther. Perhaps that's why all these things have happened so far, to get her into the palace for such a time as this...

Esther agrees to take on the mission. She gets Mordecai to gather the Jews to fast. Fasting went hand in hand with prayer, so this is the closest we get to a reference to God in the entire book! Persecution appears to have brought these two undercover Jews out of the woodwork to stand up and be counted. Esther knows this is the right thing to do and so if she dies, she dies.

There are echoes here of another of God's persecuted people who wasn't just willing to die but actually went through with it to save His people and plead their case before the King. Esther didn't just ensure Jesus would be born, she gave us a glimpse of His selfless bravery and sacrifice on our behalf.

READ Esther 4:1-17

- *Narrator A read v1-4*
- *Narrator B read v5-9*
- *Narrator C read narration in v10-17*
- *Esther read her bits in v11 and 16*
- *Mordecai to read his bits in v13-14*

Discussion Questions

- What did Mordecai want Esther to do? Why was Esther reluctant?
- How did Mordecai persuade her to do it? Is anything surprising about that?
- In what ways does their Jewishness/faith stop being so hidden? Why now?
- How could they trust God when they didn't know the outcome? Can we?
- Where do we see a picture of Jesus in this story? (We're not the hero!)
- What big thing have you been encouraged or challenged by from this story?

Esther 2:19-4:17

**How stories work**

We could just boil down some of the truths from the book of Esther into little doctrine-nuggets:

- God is in control even it doesn't look like
- Sometimes you need to stand up and be counted as one of God's people, even if you might suffer for it
- Plans against God, His people and His plan of salvation will fail

God could have saved us all a lot of time and effort and just used bullet points. But instead He gave us this fairly detailed story. Why?

One reason is because He works through human history and so one of the best ways to know Him better is to watch Him at work in a particular situation. Another reason is that the story allows us to latch onto characters and details which resonate with our own situations; ironically, making it more specific to another time makes it more relevant to our own time. Plus the story of Esther gives us characters with mixed motives in scenarios without a clear moral pathway to follow. It's just like us today!

So we don't want to lose the story in the way we study it. We want to get into the story and let the story get into us.

How these notes work

These notes first of all walk you through each section of the story, explaining difficult bits and giving some insight into how it applies. This commentary aspect of the notes is just for your preparation.

In your groups, what you'd do next is read the relevant passage from the Bible. If you'd find it helpful, we've provided a way to read it out as a group with different people reading different parts. Switch up the roles each time.

Next come a few questions to explore the story together. The best way to work through them would be to read the bit of the passage, then answer the relevant questions, then read the next bit, etc.

Don't worry too much about having everything nailed down by the end. We want people to get a feel for the story, understand what happened and make some connections to their own lives.

What *this* passage is about

This section of the Esther story is about 3 plots. In the first, there is a plot against King Ahasuerus' life, which Mordecai foils. In the second, there is a plot against all the Jews, flowing out of an argument between Mordecai and Haman. In the third, there is a plot from Mordecai as he tries to enlist Esther's help in avoiding Haman's evil scheme. The culmination of these plots is the emergence of faith in the God whose plans always succeed and who works through our human plotting, both good and bad, to bring about His purposes.

[NB]

PLOT #1**Esther 2:19-23****Commentary**

It's not quite clear when this event happens, although it has to be after the wedding since in v22 she's called "Queen Esther". Perhaps at some point all the other entrants into the beauty pageant were paraded about ("see what you could have won!") or perhaps it's when they were officially put into the B Team harem under Shaashgaz (2:14). Anyway...! We're reminded that Esther is still an undercover Jew hiding her identity. Far from ideal for God's people, who should have remained distinctive, even when in exile.

Mordecai now had a job as official in the royal court, hence "sitting at the king's gate." And he overhears of an assassination attempt on the king's life from two of the bodyguards who usually stood outside the royal bedroom. Despite how Mordecai might have felt towards Ahasuerus and how, as a Jew, he might not care too much for this pagan king, Mordecai warns him via Esther. They look into it, find it's true, and hang the would-be murderers. This act of loyalty was officially recorded in the Persian chronicles. (Not the Bible book of Chronicles!)

READ Esther 2:19-23

- *Narrator A read v19-20*
- *Narrator B read v21-23*

Discussion Questions

- What have Esther and Mordecai been up to since Esther's royal wedding?
- How overtly Jewish are they? What do you make of that?
- How does Mordecai help the king?
- Do you think he would have felt conflicted about helping in this way?
- What would you expect to happen to Mordecai following this loyalty?

PLOT #2**Esther 3:1-15****Commentary**

We might have expected the next bit of action to be Mordecai being rewarded for his service, but "after these things" (i.e. the foiled assassination attempt) another man is promoted instead. Haman. (Boo hiss!) He is given a position of honour but Mordecai refused to show him that honour.

There are a few possible reasons why. One might be arrogance on Mordecai's part; an unwillingness to bow to anyone. This can't be right as you wouldn't get a job at king's gate without being willing to show honour to those in authority! Another reason might be a belief that he should only show that kind of honour to God. But faithful Jews in other times were respectful to leaders of foreign powers and treated their own kings with greater honour. Plus believers are commanded to honour those in authority, whoever they are.

The most likely reason is a long-standing grudge against Haman's people. Mordecai was introduced in 2:5 as a Benjaminite. Haman is the only other character introduced by tribe and genealogy; he's an Agagite...

Back in Exodus 17, the first group to attack the freshly-rescued people of Israel was the Amalekites, and God promised a war with the Amalekites "from

generation to generation". This continued into the conquest of the land. And in 1 Samuel 15, Israel's first king Saul (a Benjaminite son of a man named Kish...) fought the Amalekite king called Agag. Now centuries later, Israel's ancient enemy is back opposing God's people again. You can see why Mordecai the Benjaminite might take issue bowing down to a descendent of Agag! So he explains he won't do it cos he's a Jew (3-4). Good reason? It's unclear.

Haman's motives are perfectly clear though. Like a typical Amalekite, Haman decides not only to kill Mordecai (for not saying 'good morning sir' when he walked into the office!) but also *all* the Jews everywhere. This is a serious situation. Not just for the Jews, but for everyone. If Haman's plot were to succeed, there would be no Messiah born to rescue the world!

Haman sneakily persuades Ahasuerus to sanction this holocaust by not mentioning the people group but simply pointing out that "a certain people" have infiltrated the empire who don't keep the king's laws. They are different and must not be tolerated!

They cast lots to decide the day, most likely rolling dice or pulling sticks from a pot to see which day and month were the most auspicious. It fell on the 14th day of Adar, 11 months away. The decree went out to everywhere in the empire on the 13th of Nisan (12), which is the day before Passover. When the Jews would be preparing to celebrate their rescue from the oppressive Egyptians to be God's chosen people, another evil superpower was threatening to wipe them out. Could God be trusted to continue His faithfulness to them and finish the job He started with the exodus?

Meanwhile, Ahasuerus and Haman sat and drank, unmoved by the devastation they have unleashed. But the people of Susa cannot understand it. It is totally irrational. So it is with all persecution of God's people. The same evil behind Pharaoh's slaughter of the Israelite babies, the same which would later inspire Herod's copycat child massacre, is once again attacking God's people for no good reason. Jesus experienced this attack and so do His followers today.

READ Esther 3:1-15

- *Narrator A read narration in v1-6*
- *King's servants read their bit in v3*
- *Narrator B read narration in v7-11*
- *Haman to read his bit in v8-10*
- *King Ahasuerus to read his bit v11*
- *Narrator C to read v12-15*

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think Mordecai refused to bow to Haman? What clues are there in the passage?
- What do you think of Haman as a character?
- How does he put his plot into action?
- Why is this plot such a serious problem? Not just for Jews...?
- What might Jews have made of the decree coming just before Passover?
- Why might the citizens of Susa have been confused?
- Where do we see this kind of irrational persecution of God's people today?
- If we were Jews back then, what questions would we be asking of God?