



# 6

## God Uses Esther

### Key Theme

- God uses people to accomplish His perfect plans.

### Key Passages

- Esther 2:5–9, 2:15–18, 3:8–13, 4:6–5:5, 7:1–10, 8:3–12

### Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe God's sovereign control over the events described in Esther.
- Explain how God used people to protect the Jews.



## Lesson Overview



### Come On In

Students will practice the memory verse by working on a crossword puzzle.

- Write on the board, "How did a Jewish exile become a Persian queen?"
- Print one Memory Verse Review Sheet from the Resource DVD-ROM for each student.



### Activity 1: God Uses Esther Class Notes

Students will fill out the God Uses Esther Class Notes as you study the lesson.

- Student Guides
- God Uses Esther Answer Key from the Resource DVD-ROM



### Studying God's Word

God's sovereignty is clearly seen throughout all the events in Esther. Esther was gathered with other young women and then chosen to be Queen of Persia. Next, a plot was schemed to destroy all the Jews. God had positioned the young Jewish queen in order to foil the plot and save the Jews.

- Go Before the Throne.
- Read through the lesson key passages and Prepare to Share.



### Activity 2: A Providential Plan

Students will examine a concise overview of the book of Esther, looking for the hand of God in directing the events through the actions of people.

- Student Guides
- Pencils



## Prepare to Share

### SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the lesson key passages along with this background.

If you haven't done so, take time to read through the entire book of Esther so that the flow of the events is in your mind. As you teach the lesson, you will be summarizing some events for the students and focusing on a few key passages in your time of study together. As you read Esther, you might notice that something is missing . . . God! Nowhere in the account is God mentioned. Nor is this book alluded to in the New Testament. Though God is unmentioned by name, His sovereign hand is evident throughout these events, and that will be drawn out in the lesson.

The events of Esther take place during the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus. There is a bit of debate about who this ruler was (see historical section below), but we will connect him to Darius I who reigned from 521–485 BC. This places these events from about 520–510 BC with Esther being made queen in 515—the same year that the Temple was dedicated by Zerubbabel (Ezra 6). So these things happened after the first return of the Jews to Jerusalem, but before Ezra's return in 467.

As the book of Esther opens, King Ahasuerus (Darius I) had prepared a great feast, but his queen, Vashti, refused to appear before the king's guests. As a result, the king's counselors directed him to remove the queen and seek a new queen from among the beautiful young virgins of the Persian Empire. This decree by the king (whose heart was in God's sovereign hand—Proverbs 21:1) brought Esther into the picture.

How does a young Jewish girl wind up as the queen of the Persian Empire? It surely requires an amazing series of events—events under the guidance of an omnipotent God. But these events also require the interaction of many different people. God typically works out His plans in the world through human agents. From the king and queen to the party guests, and from Mordecai to Haman and the many messengers and scribes, all of these individuals and their personal wills, desires, thoughts, and actions ultimately brought about what God intended. Only an omnipotent God could bring about a certain result amid such a myriad of intersecting factors.

Before Esther was known as Esther, her name was Hadassah. Her great-grandfather, Kish, was among the

captives carried away by Nebuchadnezzar with King Jehoiachin in 599 BC (Esther 2:5–6). After her parents died, she was cared for by her older cousin Mordecai. They lived in Shushan (or Susa)—the winter residence of the Persian kings. Esther was among the beautiful young virgins who were gathered together, possibly by force, at the palace fortress. At several points in the account, we learn that Mordecai asked her to not let anyone know that she was a Jew (2:10, 2:20). Hadasah (meaning “myrtle”) would be immediately recognized as a Jewish name, so her name was changed to the Persian name Esther, which likely means “star.”

In the palace, the women were cared for by Hegai, the king's eunuch, and given beauty treatments for one year before the king would select one as his queen (2:8–14). We see God's hand, behind the scenes, in Esther's favor with Hegai and his special treatment of her (2:9, 2:15). On the day Esther was to appear before the king, she pleased him above all others and was made queen. God had elevated a Jewish captive to the queen of Persia through the decision of a king.

All the while, Esther's cousin Mordecai had been keeping in touch with her. He was likely a scribe or advisor in the palace and had access to her (2:11, 2:19). At one point, Mordecai uncovered a plot to murder the king. He informed Esther, the men were executed, and all of it was recorded in the chronicles of the king. Sometime later, a man named Haman came to power under King Ahasuerus. Mordecai would not bow to Haman, and Haman became enraged. Haman arranged a plot to have all the Jews in Persia killed on a specific day (3:1–15).

As Mordecai and the Jews around the kingdom heard of the decree, they were distraught. Esther had the same reaction when she heard the news and contacted Mordecai (4:1–9). When Mordecai asked her to confront the king and ask him to spare the Jews, she was afraid to do so, knowing that she could be put to death. Mordecai counseled her with wise words, reminding her that since she was a Jew, she would not escape the decree. If she did not go to the king, Mordecai was certain that deliverance would come from another place. He also recognized her placement in the palace as God's providence: “Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (4:14). Esther had a choice to make.

Esther appeared uninvited before the king and was granted access—her life was spared (5:1–2). Surely, the

king's heart was in God's hand. After this, a series of events quickly unfolded, again demonstrating God's hand: Esther arranged a banquet for the king and Haman; Haman planned to kill Mordecai; Mordecai was honored by the king; at a second banquet, Esther revealed Haman's plot to kill her and her people; the king ordered Haman hung on the gallows at his own home; Mordecai was elevated to Haman's position; and Esther and Mordecai were allowed to write their own decree to protect the Jews. Wow! If you think that all this happened by chance, you do not understand who God is.

As you read through Esther, there can be no doubt that God was just as involved in protecting the Jews at this point as He was involved in leading them out of Egypt and as He was in the crucifixion of Christ on the Cross. Even though His name is not mentioned, we dare not deny that God was accomplishing His plans through each of these people.

## HISTORICAL/APOLOGETICS BACKGROUND

Although the book of Esther appears relatively early in the Old Testament sequence of books, the events happen rather late in the actual timeline of Old Testament history. The time period of Esther occurs with the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah while the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, whose books appear later in the Bible, actually lived long before Esther. So be careful to help your students understand where all of the pieces fit together. You can use the History of Israel poster to help with that.

There is debate about the identity of the king in the book of Esther. Some believe the time period of Esther was actually *after* Ezra's return during the reign of Xerxes (485–465 BC). The dates and explanations used in this curriculum are based on the work of Archbishop James Ussher. It is difficult to assign exact dates in this period since there are few records and multiple rulers at the same time. Some rulers used the same titles and names. Also, the records in Greek use different names than the Persian records, and the biblical names are sometimes transliterated into Hebrew. With that said, whether this was one king or another, God was still in control.

The events recorded in the book of Esther are still

celebrated by Jews today. After the Jews were delivered from annihilation, the festival of Purim was celebrated (9:18–32). This festival is still celebrated each year by the Jews to commemorate God's deliverance through Esther and Mordecai.

Here is another important idea to consider from a historical perspective: If Haman's plan had been carried out, Zerubbabel, who had led the return to Jerusalem, would have been killed. Why does that matter? Zerubbabel was a descendant of David who is in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:12. This plan would have removed the possibility of Jesus being born as a descendant of David. If the line of David had been destroyed, then the promised Messiah would not have come to pass. Satan would love nothing more than to thwart God's plan, and we can safely assume that Satan was pleased with Haman's plan, if not directly orchestrating it behind the scenes. And yet God's plans stand. Let us proclaim along with Job: "I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You."



## BEFORE THE THRONE

Lord Jesus, I greatly rejoice today as I remember how you providentially moved through the people and events in Persia all those years ago. Each time I read this book, I stand in awe of you. You were in control then . . . and you are still in control, moving in much the same way. It's true! You are still sovereignly accomplishing your will today through your people. I know that. But there are still times when I get scared or depressed. There have been times when I've almost lost hope. Forgive me, Lord. Help me grow in this area. When things look bad, bring young Esther to my mind. Give me the courage to trust you and stand in faith believing you are in control and want what is best for me. Use me as you used her. To glorify you is my one desire—in the good times and the bad. May your Word come alive as I teach this lesson. Use it to penetrate each heart and convict us all to trust you more.



## COME ON IN

- Write on the board, “How did a Jewish exile become a Persian queen?”
- Students will practice the memory verse by working on a crossword puzzle and reciting the verse to a friend.



## Review

As we think about our tour through biblical history, we are studying the period of the return of the exiles. Last week we looked at the first phase of that return under the leadership of Zerubbabel.

- ? What two things were restored in Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel? *First, the sacrifices were restored (Ezra 3). Then, after 21 years, the Temple was completed and worship of God was reinstated as God desired.*

The Temple was completed and dedicated in 515 BC and this is likely the same year

that Esther was made queen. However, there are some historians who disagree with that date and believe the King Ahasuerus of Esther was Xerxes, not Darius I. Regardless, the events of Esther occurred between the first and second phases of the return to Jerusalem—before Ezra returned in 467 BC.

Today we are going to continue looking at this period of the return of the exiles.



- Write on the board, “How did a Jewish exile become a Persian queen?”



## Studying God's Word

### READ THE WORD

We are going to begin our reading in Esther chapter 2 today, so let me give you the gist of what happened to lead up to these events. King Ahasuerus held a banquet where his queen, Vashti, had refused to appear before the men at the feast. In his anger at her refusal, she was removed as queen. We pick up the storyline there. Let's read Esther 2:1–18 together. *Have someone read the passage aloud.*

Esther 2:1–18

- Have students turn to the class notes in their Student Guides before you begin to teach.

### EXAMINE THE WORD

#### Observe the Text

- ? How much time had passed from Vashti's banishment and the events of chapter 2? *It is not clear from the text, but possibly several years.*
- ? What was the plan to replace the queen? *Beautiful virgins were to be brought from around the empire, and the king would choose one of them to be his queen.*

- ? **What city did these events happen in?** *Shushan, or Susa, was one of the capitals of Persia. There was a citadel, or palace, there where many of the events of Esther took place.*
- ? **Who was Mordecai? This is question 1.** *He was a Jew who was the great-grandson of one of the exiles.*
- ? **Who was Kish?** *Kish was a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin who was carried away in the captivity of Jehoiachin in 599 BC. These events are described in 2 Kings 24:8–16. Based on that passage, Kish was likely of a high class or at least a skilled worker. The poorest people were left in Jerusalem under that phase of the captivity.*
- ? **Question 2 asks, how are Mordecai and Hadassah related?** *They are cousins since she is his uncle's daughter. Mordecai must have been a bit older than Hadassah to take her under his care when her parents died.*
- ? **How is Hadassah described?** *She was lovely and beautiful.*
- ? **In what manner was she taken to the citadel?** *We are not given any details in the text. It may have been forceful or voluntary.*
- ? **How did Hadassah come to be known as Esther? Answer question 3.** *The text does not tell us, but we can make a reasonable inference based on the information in verse 10. Mordecai was apparently concerned about her Jewish heritage being known. Her name is Jewish for "myrtle," so it would have given away her heritage. It may be that Mordecai suggested the name change. Esther is the Persian word for "star."*
- ? **How was Esther treated in the palace?** *She found favor in the eyes of the head eunuch, Hegai. He gave her special treatment (verse 9) and she was given seven special attendants and special quarters.*
- ? **What does verse 11 tell us about Mordecai? Fill in question 4.** *He was concerned for Esther and continued to look after her.*
- ? **How was Mordecai able to have access to Esther?** *He clearly had some position within the palace that allowed him access to the place where the women stayed. Based on later information, he may have been a scribe at the palace, but we cannot be certain. Later, Mordecai is elevated to the second in command next to Ahasuerus.*
- ? **Question 5 asks, how long was Esther in the palace before she came before the king?** *The beauty preparations were carried out for 12 months, so it was at least a year before she was presented to the king. This was in the seventh year of his reign according to verse 16.*
- ? **What did Esther take when she appeared before the king?** *The text does not say exactly what she took, but she took the advice of Hegai. He would have treated her favorably and advised her well. This is likely a reference to wearing some form of jewelry or clothing that the king would have appreciated.*
- ? **What phrase is repeated in verses 9, 15, and 17? Answer number 6.** *Esther "obtained favor" in the eyes of the people of the palace, including the king.*
- ? **How did the king respond? This is Question 7.** *He chose Esther as his queen and held a feast in her honor.*

## Discover the Truth

One of the most intriguing aspects of the book of Esther is the absence of a key character.

? **Who is not mentioned in what we just read?** *God is not mentioned anywhere in the book of Esther.*

Just because God is not mentioned, does not mean that He was not involved in what happened in this account. Think of our memory verse: Proverbs 21:1. *Read the verse.*

Proverbs 21:1

? **What does Proverbs 21:1 tell us about the king's choosing of Esther as queen?** *Knowing that God directs the king's heart, we can only conclude that the choice of Esther as queen and the favor of the eunuch and other members of the king's court were from God's hand.*

We must trust that God's character does not change and that He was absolutely sovereign in the events we just read and was directing the course of history. Even though God is not mentioned, He is always present and directing the affairs of men. We can never leave God out of the picture.

SOVEREIGN



## READ THE WORD

We are going to skip over two points in the storyline. 2:19–23 tells of how Mordecai uncovered a plot to kill the king. The king had the two men hanged and Mordecai's name was recorded in the chronicles of the king. 3:1–7 describes how a man named Haman rose to power in the king's court. Haman came to hate Mordecai because he would not bow to him. Haman hatched a plot to eliminate Mordecai and all of the Jews, convincing the king to seal an order for the destruction of all of the Jews in the Persian Empire. Let's pick up the action in Esther 3:8–5:8 and then we will jump ahead a bit to chapter 7. *Have someone read the first passage aloud.*

Esther 3:8–5:8

## EXAMINE THE WORD

### Observe the Text

? **Question 8 asks, how did Haman convince the king to allow him to wipe out the Jews?** *He used the king's pride, pointing out that the Jews did not obey the laws of the king, and he also offered a handsome sum of 10,000 talents of silver to the king from the plundering of the Jews.*

? **Did the king know which group of people Haman had in mind?** *There is no indication in the text that he knew which people was targeted, but it would seem unlikely that he did not hear the final reading of the decree.*

? **How was the decree spread?** *It was written in the languages of all the people in the empire and then sent by couriers to all of the provinces.*

- ? **How did Mordecai and rest of the Jews respond to the decree? Answer question 9.** *There was great mourning among the Jews, and they fasted and mourned in sackcloth and ashes.*
- ? **What did Mordecai ask Esther to do? This is question 10.** *To go to the king and plead for the lives of the Jews*
- ? **Answer number 11. What was Esther afraid of?** *If she entered the king's presence uninvited (she had not been asked to appear in the court for 30 days), she could be put to death.*
- ? **How did Mordecai respond to Esther's concern?** *He reminded her that she would be killed because she was a Jew and that she may have been put in this position of influence to bring about the deliverance of the Jews.*
- ? **How did Mordecai demonstrate his faith in God?** *In 4:14, he makes it clear that the Jews would be saved by another means if Esther did not attempt to save them. Though God is not mentioned in his reasoning, we must assume that he trusted that the Jews, as God's chosen people, would be delivered from this destruction.*
- ? **How did Esther demonstrate her reliance on God as she prepared to approach the king?** *She asked all of the Jews in Shushan to fast for three days, and she and her maids did likewise. There was surely much prayer involved in this fasting though it is not directly mentioned.*
- ? **What happened as Esther appeared in the king's court? Answer number 12.** *She found favor in his sight and her request for him to appear at a banquet was granted.*
- ? **What was Esther's second request? This is question 13.** *She asked that the king and Haman attend a second banquet the next day.*

After this banquet, 5:9–14 describe Haman leaving the palace with joy, but being downcast upon seeing Mordecai. As a result, he built a gallows and intended to ask the king to have Mordecai hanged the next day. Chapter 6 tells of the following day and a twist delivered to Haman. Remember that plot to kill the king? Mordecai had never been rewarded for that and it just so happened that the king had been reminded of Mordecai's service the night before. As the king asked Haman what should be done to reward a man who served the king, Haman supposed it was himself the king was talking about. Haman suggested a reward and then was told to carry out the reward . . . on Mordecai! Haman fulfilled the king's command, but then he was absolutely ashamed. But, he got called to the second banquet with Esther and the king.

Will someone please read Esther 7:1–8:12? *Choose a reader.*

Esther 7:1–8:12

- ? **How did the king react to Esther's explanation and petition? Answer number 14.** *He wanted to know who hatched the plot.*
- ? **How did he react to hearing it was Haman?** *He was enraged and went to the garden to think.*
- ? **How did Haman respond?** *He was fearful and was pleading before the queen for his life, knowing the king was planning against him.*

- ? **Number 15 asks, what ironic twist happens concerning the gallows Haman had built?** *Haman was hung on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.*
- ? **Who replaced Haman in his role as counselor? This is question 16.** *Mordecai replaced him as the signet ring from Haman was given to Mordecai.*
- ? **What request does Esther make in 8:5–6?** *She asks that the king write a decree to reverse the order to annihilate the Jews.*
- ? **Why couldn't the order just be retracted?** *Nothing that the king had decreed could be reversed. The edicts of kings were permanent and could not simply be reversed (Daniel 6:8). This is what landed Daniel in the den of lions even though the king wanted to reverse his order.*
- ? **What clever plan did Mordecai devise to save the Jews? Answer number 17.** *He wrote an edict that allowed the Jews in each city to gather together and defend themselves and to annihilate anyone who tried to attack them.*
- ? **What do you notice about the edict of Mordecai in 8:11 and the decree Haman wrote in 3:13?** *The same basic language is used in both decrees. Mordecai used Haman's language to bring about a reversal of the events.*
- ? **The last question asks, who was responsible for orchestrating all of these events?** *All of these things happened under the divine direction of God, but each person was entirely accountable for his or her actions.*

After the couriers delivered the decree to the provinces of the empire, the Jews were prepared for the day of destruction and defended themselves according to the decree of Mordecai. They defended themselves and over 75,000 of their enemies were wiped out on that day (9:16). Interestingly, they did not take any of the plunder of their enemies as Haman had planned to do. The salvation of the Jews had come about through the actions of many people throughout the empire.

### Discover the Truth

Haman hated Mordecai and the Jews and sought to kill all of them. Mordecai was earnest in pleading with Esther. Esther had to decide whether to risk her life in approaching the king. She had to devise a way to let the king know she was a Jew and would be killed under Haman's decree. The king had to choose to honor Mordecai and then choose to execute Haman.

We know that God was in control of all of the events that were happening—nothing is outside of His direction. God could have chosen to instantly and miraculously bring an end to the decree of Haman, but He did not. God chooses to use people to bring about His plans. All of the people involved acted in a way that brought about the results that God desired.





# A Providential Plan

## MATERIALS

- Student Guides
- Pencils

## INSTRUCTIONS

*The students will be examining a very short overview of the events of Esther*

There is a lot of detail in the account of Esther that we have skipped over today, and I surely hope you take time to read through the entire book this week. In your Student Guide, you will find the activity A Providential Plan. Look over the list of the summary of the events of Esther and complete the activity. We will discuss the questions in a few minutes.

## CONNECT TO THE TRUTH

Getting a big-picture view of the book of Esther should help you to see how God was guiding all of these events even though He is not mentioned in the text.

- ? **In what areas do you see God acting directly in the storyline?** *Discuss various answers.*
- ? **What events are tightly connected in the storyline?** *One example is the fact that Mordecai was not rewarded for exposing the plot to kill the king only to be recognized on the day Haman comes to ask the king to execute him. Several of the components loop back on one another throughout the events.*

None of these events is the result of luck or chance or fate. As you look at Proverbs 16:33, you can see that God directed the date of Haman's decree to allow time for an appropriate response by Esther and Mordecai. The lot fell on that date because God is in control of the universe, not because it was a lucky roll of the dice.

- ? **What disastrous result would have come if Haman was able to accomplish his plan to wipe out the Jews?** *The line of the Messiah would have been wiped out and Jesus would never have been born. Here we see a clear connection between the events of Esther and the redemptive thread throughout Scripture.*

One of the attributes of God we have not talked much about is His independence. Refer to Attributes poster. When we say that God is independent, we mean that He does not rely or depend on anyone or anything outside of Himself—He is completely self-sufficient.

- ? **Does this contradict the idea that God is using people to accomplish the plans He wishes to bring about through Esther and Mordecai?** *No, God can be independent and still choose to use people to bring about His plans. God did not need to use Esther and the king at the urging of Mordecai, but that is the method that He chose to bring about the rescue from Haman's plan. God could have done a supernatural work to prevent the slaughter or save the line of the Messiah, but He chose to work in a natural way that is no less amazing when we look at all of the events and people involved.*





# Applying God's Word

## WHAT YOU HEARD IN THE WORD

God guides the course of history in amazing ways, even if He is not acknowledged as doing so. Esther was an unlikely queen and an unlikely source of salvation for the Jews from the hands of the wicked Haman. God's sovereignty is on display in preserving His chosen people and showing Himself faithful to His promises. Just as God had brought them out of Egypt, brought them out of the wilderness wandering, and delivered them from many enemies in the past, He was now saving them from Haman's plan to wipe them out.

God chose to use Esther as the person who would bring about the salvation of her own people. It was an amazingly intricate series of events that we can only understand in light of God's providential direction. And we can understand how all of these things had to happen to allow Jesus to be born so that He could live a perfect life, die upon the Cross for our sins, and rise from the dead. We can rejoice knowing that God will fulfill His plans through events that seem hopeless to us, that He might redeem a people for Himself.

## GOD'S WORD IN THE REAL WORLD

- ? **How would you use Esther to help a skeptic or a new believer understand God's providence in history?** *Discuss various answers, pointing to the fact that the intricacies can only be explained by His providence. Also point out the necessity of saving the Jews so that Jesus could be born as our Savior.*
- ? **How does the account of Esther help you trust God more?** *Discuss various answers.*

? One of the most memorable lines of this book comes when Mordecai tells Esther, “Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” What principle can we draw from this statement in light of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility? *We can be sure that God will use us as we act in obedience to the clear commands of Scripture. Even when we do not know exactly how God will use our actions, we must act in faith, doing what is right in God’s eyes. We must acknowledge that God works in the world through people, and that He will place us in situations where our actions will be used to bring about His plans. As we walk in the Spirit, we will be accomplishing God’s plan in the world.*

? Mordecai seems to have had a very firm grasp on God’s control and protection of the Jews, asserting that God would surely protect them if Esther chose not to confront the king. Where are you struggling with trusting God and His promises? *Discuss various answers, pointing to the truthfulness and authority of God’s Word as a reflection of His character.*

? How might you use your understanding of Esther to disciple your children or your brothers and sisters? *Discuss various answers.*



### MEMORY VERSE

**Proverbs 21:1** The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.



### GROUP PRAYER TIME

Be sure to pray with your class before you dismiss them.

- Thank God for guiding history in a way that brought a Savior.
- Praise God for His independence and His goodness in using us to accomplish His plans.
- Ask God for wisdom in understanding His guidance throughout history.

