



Esther
PERSON OF
INTEREST

STUDY GUIDE

WEEK ONE – May 1

Esther—An Unexpected Queen



Esther 1:1-2:18

This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush: 2 At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, 3 and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present. 4 For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. 5 When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa. 6 The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. 7 Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality. 8 By the king's command each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished. 9 Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes. 10 On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him — Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas — 11 to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. 12 But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger. 13 Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times 14 and were closest to the king — Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom. 15 "According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?" he asked. "She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her." 16 Then Memucan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, "Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. 17 For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, 'King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.' 18 This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord. 19 "Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. 20 Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest." 21 The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memucan proposed. 22 He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, proclaiming in each people's tongue that every man should be ruler over his own household.

2:1 Later when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. 2 Then the king's personal attendants proposed, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. 3 Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. 4 Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it. 5 Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, 6 who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. 7 Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died. 8 When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. 9 The girl pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem.

10 Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. 11 Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her. 12 Before a girl's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. 13 And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. 14 In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name. 15 When the turn came for Esther (the girl Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. 16 She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. 17 Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. 18 And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality. (NIV)

Sometimes, our lives take unplanned turns—which lead to situations we can't even comprehend—but the ultimate purpose often remains hidden until a later time. As we begin our study of Esther, we will watch God's hand at work—time and again.

POINTS FOR US TO CONSIDER:

IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW THE BACK-STORY (Esther 1)

As we come to look at and consider the book of Esther and all that's taking place here, it's important to know the "back-story." Our scripture passage for this week begins with a party and ends with a beauty pageant. The party was a six-month-long, drunken orgy during which the leaders of the kingdom of Persia were given access and excess from the table, vine cellars, and harem of King Xerxes. When Queen Vashti refuses to appear wearing nothing but her crown, Xerxes (and all the men in leadership) were threatened. He's advised to remove the crown from Vashti's head and to never allow her to come to his chambers again. This edict would mean she was put back into the general population of the harem and would live out the rest of her life as one of the royal concubines to be used by the men of the court and guests of the kingdom. Vashti's refusal to comply with Xerxes' request and standing up to the king cost her everything.

- Can you recall a time when have you ever stood up—either for or against something—and it cost you?
- What did it feel like?
- Do you think as Christians we take stands when we feel led—or do we tend to back down?
- Where is God calling you to take a stand now?

THE BACHELOR AND UNLKELY CONTESTANT (2:1-11)

Xerxes (we're told) remembers what Vashti has done and how he permanently banished her—and now realizes the need for a new queen. His royal advisors encourage Xerxes to conduct an empire-wide Bachelorette contest, if you will. Now in Susa, there was a man named Mordecai—a Jew who had been carried into exile by the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar. He was very familiar with the pain of exile and all that it meant to be subject to the whims of a pagan king. Mordecai has raised his niece, Hadassah, because she's been orphaned—so she too was familiar with the pain and heartache of life in exile. Hadassah is also called Esther—her Persian name—and is like a daughter to Mordecai.

Esther was taken to the citadel and placed under the care of Hegai—the chief eunuch responsible for the care, development, and training of the women in the haram (especially the contestants for Bachelorette of Susa). We're told Esther caught Hegai's eye, and she received favorable treatment in terms of diet, beauty regimen, and mentoring. Hegai assigned Esther to seven select maids from the king's palace.

Mordecai warned Esther not to share her ethnicity. Each day, we find Mordecai nervously walking back and forth in the courtyard outside the harem in hopes of helping to continue to guide Esther as she prepared for her one-night audition with the king.

- Have you ever (like Esther) found yourself in a powerless place?
- What helped you through it?

- Has being a person of faith ever been a social inconvenience?

NOT EVERYONE GETS A ROSE / NEVER UNDERESTIMATE GOD'S FAVOR (2:12-15)

Each "pageant contestant" endured 12 months of beauty treatments (6 months of skin conditioning with oil of myrrh and 6 months of perfumes and cosmetics). When the time came for their one-night audition, they were permitted to take anything with them they wanted. The next morning, they were returned to another part of the king's harem—the general population of concubines—unless they received a "call-back" from the king. Apparently, the last time this type of contest happened, it was for Queen Vashti—and most women didn't get the rose and were not invited to return.

When Esther's turn came—four, full years after Vashti's removal (that's a lot of contestants!)—Esther asked for nothing other than what the keeper of the harem recommended. We're told she won the favor of everyone who saw her—including Xerxes. When he saw Esther, Xerxes was more attracted to her than he had been to any of the other women. He set a royal crown on her head and threw a great banquet—declaring a holiday.

- Can you ever think of a time when you were the beneficiary of unexpected favor?
- How did you respond?

THE UNEXPECTED QUEEN (2:16-18)

Esther, the Bachelorette, becomes an expected queen.

- When in your life have you been elevated to a place or opportunity and wondered why?
- What did you do when you found yourself in that position?
- How do you respond to grace and favor?

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Whom do you need to tell about it?*

WEEK TWO – May 8

Esther—Lives on a Collision Course



Esther 2:19-3:15

When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. 20 But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up. 21 During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. 22 But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. 23 And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were hanged on a gallows. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

3:1 After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles. 2 All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor. 3 Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" 4 Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore, they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew. 5 When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. 6 Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes. 7 In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, they cast the pur (that is, the lot) in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar. 8 Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. 9 If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business." 10 So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. 11 "Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please." 12 Then on the thirteenth day of the first month the royal secretaries were summoned. They wrote out in the script of each province and in the language of each people all Haman's orders to the king's satraps, the governors of the various provinces and the nobles of the various peoples. These were written in the name of King Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring. 13 Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews — young and old, women and little children — on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. 14 A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day. 15 Spurred on by the king's command, the couriers went out, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered. (NIV)

Sometimes, we find ourselves caught in the middle of stories and situations with which we had little or nothing to do—but we’re placed there to bring some form of resolution. Esther is not mentioned in this chapter—not once—but the collision course between her people and an ancient enemy is about to be played out between Mordecai the Jew and Haman the Agagite. Esther doesn’t know it, but this conflict and her response to it will shape not only her life and destiny, but also that of her people for generations.

POINTS FOR US TO CONSIDER:

ALWAYS DO THE RIGHT THING (2:19-23)

One day, Mordecai was sitting outside the palace gate and heard a couple of King Xerxes’ guards conspiring to assassinate the king. He sent word to Queen Esther—who told Xerxes—who investigated the rumor and found it to be true. The two guards were hung on the gallows for their deception, and the loyalty of Mordecai was recorded in the annals of King Xerxes—but nothing was done to reward him. Mordecai didn’t report this plot for the reward—he did it because it was the right thing to do. That’s good advice for living.

- Why does doing the right thing seem more difficult?
- Have you ever found yourself in this type of situation?

GENERATIONAL DISOBEDIENCE FESTERS (3:1-6)

As chapter 3 begins, King Xerxes has elevated Haman—an Agagite—to second in command in Persia. This is a significant appointment because Agagites (also called Amalekites) were long-standing enemies of God’s people (see Exodus 17:8-16 and 1 Samuel 14, 15). God had instructed King Saul through the prophet Samuel to kill all the Amalekites and to destroy all their flocks and herds. Saul not only disobeyed God—allowing King Agag to live and allowing the plunder of flocks and herds to be distributed—the hatred between the Jews and the Agagites grew worse with each passing generation. Here, in exile, an Agagite has risen to a place of great prominence and importance—and he remembers the generational hatred his people have toward God’s people—a generational consequence of Saul’s disobedience and sin.

It didn’t take Mordecai long to give Haman a reason to dislike him. It seems Haman liked titles, power, and authority—and he expected anyone lower than him in the pecking order to bow down and pay honor to him. But Mordecai refused because it was a violation of the second commandment to bow down and worship anyone or anything other than God (Exodus 20:4). The royal officials asked Mordecai why he refused—and when Mordecai told them it was because he was a Jew, that was all Haman needed to try to settle a generational score.

Haman was not only determined to kill Mordecai, he wanted to kill all his kin—which would include Esther. She is not specifically mentioned here, but the clash and conflict between her husband’s second-in-command and her uncle is about to squeeze her like a vice. (Back-story: During this time, it was not uncommon to allow captured and conquered people to practice their religions and keep their

customs. Therefore, Artaxerxes wasn't threatened when Ezra, Zerubbabel, and Nehemiah took the actions they took to rebuild a temple and the walls of the Jerusalem—it was part of what made their empire great. This was dramatically different than the Assyrians and Babylonians.)

- Has there ever been a time when you found yourself caught in a generational battle?
- What generational battles or regrets are you trying to rise above—or have you risen above?
- What steps do you need to take in this process?

DON'T USE POWER SELFISHLY NOR ABDICATE RESPONSIBILITY (3:7-14)

Five years after Esther is named queen, Haman begins to hatch his plan. Haman told a generic story about people with different customs who had been allowed to keep them, but Haman now believed it was in Xerxes' best interest to not allow this tradition to continue. Haman volunteers to pay for their extermination—but Xerxes not only says he'll pay for it, he makes one of the biggest mistakes a leader can make—he delegated his sole authority to Haman—apparently without any plan for accountability. Xerxes gave Haman his signet ring—the symbol of his absolute authority—and Haman issued a decree that set the extermination of the Jews into motion throughout Persia.

- Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely—have you ever been a victim of this principle? Guilty of this? Tried to correct this?
- Have you ever given authority away—only to find it has had devastating consequences?
- What would you do differently?

WHO IS BEWILDERED? (3:15)

The chapter ends with Xerxes and Haman sitting down to drink—which seems to be a recurring theme for Xerxes. They're doing great, but the rest of Susa is bewildered—that's what happens when power is abused, and entire groups of people are oppressed in nothing more than a power grab.

The misuse or abdication of power results in all kinds of innocent victims.

- How might you/the group begin to take the kind of steps necessary to reach out to innocent victims?
- What needs to be done to rectify the situation(s)?

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Whom do you need to tell about it?*

Esther 4:1-17

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. 2 But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. 3 In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes. 4 When Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. 5 Then Esther summoned Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why. 6 So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. 7 Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. 8 He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. 9 Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. 10 Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, 11 "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king." 12 When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, 13 he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" 15 Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: 16 "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." 17 So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions. (NIV)

Bill Hinson, the great Methodist preacher of the last generation, once said, "There are two great days in a person's life—the day you were born and the day you discover what you were born for." We don't have any record of Esther's birth, but we're about to see her "Carpe' Diem"—seize the day and claim the greatness for which she was born. In a very real sense, true greatness comes when we find the place where our lives and God's will intersect for maximum impact.

POINTS FOR US TO CONSIDER:

GREATNESS CAN BE BORN OUT OF GRIEF (4:1-7)

When Mordecai (and the rest of the Jews) read the instructions that Haman sent out in Xerxes' name, they were heartbroken and immediately began to mourn. Jews to this day have unusual ways of mourning. They put ashes on their heads and wear sackcloth—kind of like wooly burlap—to accentuate how uncomfortable they're supposed to be. The Jews were to be killed all on the same day—including women and children—and their property was to be distributed to everyone. This law of Xerxes could not be revoked—the sentence had been set in stone and the clock was running out on God's people living in Persia. They had two months to live.

- How has a time of grief, loss, or hardship shaped you for good?
- What did you learn from such a time?
- How might you help another in their time of grief, loss, or hardship?

GREATNESS OFTEN INVOLVES RISK (4:8-11)

Mordecai went as far as the king's gate but wasn't allowed to enter—because Persian kings didn't like to see sad people. After all, who wants to be bothered with the inconvenience of people's pain? When Esther learns what's happening, she sends fresh clothes for Mordecai to dress himself, but he refuses. Esther then sends her servant to find out why Mordecai is behaving this way. This is an important pivot point in the story because Esther's about to come face to face with her people's grief—and she'll have to decide whether to use her position, power, and privilege to change the course of history.

- Change cannot happen without friction—nothing worthwhile happens without stretching, shaping, and molding. Can you recall a time when you were stretched, shaped, or molded?
- How did God help you through that process?
- Where is God calling you to take a risk? What are you being asked to risk?
- What next steps do you need to take?
- How might the group help you?

GREATNESS OVERCOMES EXCUSES (4:12-14)

When Esther hears about what's happening, she sends an excuse back to Mordecai saying she can only go see the king when he summons her—and he's not sent for her in the last 30 days. Mordecai pushes right back and basically says four things:

- 1) Just because you're the queen doesn't mean you get to sit this one out—the edict applies to you, too!
- 2) If you remain silent, I'm confident God will raise up someone else (Mordecai's relying on the faithfulness and promises of God here).
- 3) If you remain silent, you and your family will perish—including me.
- 4) What if you were born for this very moment? Seize the day!

Esther is a bit like Moses here, but Mordecai speaks truth into her life. Just like Esther, we too need to understand God has a plan bigger than we can see or imagine—but He needs us to do our part.

- What part is God asking you to play?
- What needs to happen in order for you to respond?

GREATNESS—SPIRITUAL GREATNESS—IS BORN IN PRAYER AND FASTING (4:15-17)

Esther's response reveals she understands who she is and Whose she is. She asks Mordecai to call all her people to a three-day fast—to be still and know the Lord is God and to ask God's favor—because after three days, Esther is going to meet with the king.

- What role do spiritual disciplines play in your life?
- How does your community support you in the practice of spiritual disciplines?
- What support would be helpful?

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Whom do you need to tell about it?*

WEEK FOUR – May 22

Esther—Obedience Is Full Of Surprises



Esther 5:1-6:14

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. 2 When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. 3 Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you." 4 "If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him." 5 "Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks." So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. 6 As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, "Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." 7 Esther replied, "My petition and my request is this: 8 If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question." 9 Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai. 10 Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home. Calling together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, 11 Haman boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honored him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials. 12 "And that's not all," Haman added. "I'm the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow. 13 But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate." 14 His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Have a gallows built, seventy-five feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go with the king to the dinner and be happy." This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the gallows built.

6:1 That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. 2 It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. 3 "What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" the king asked. "Nothing has been done for him," his attendants answered. 4 The king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows he had erected for him. 5 His attendants answered, "Haman is standing in the court." "Bring him in," the king ordered. 6 When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" Now Haman thought to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?" 7 So he answered the king, "For the man the king delights to honor, 8 have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. 9 Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the

horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'" 10 "Go at once," the king commanded Haman. "Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended." 11 So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" 12 Afterward Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, 13 and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him — you will surely come to ruin!" 14 While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared. (NIV)

When we choose the path of obedience, it doesn't always turn out exactly as we plan—but in the end, God's favor is found in obedience.

POINTS FOR US TO CONSIDER:

ASK FOR HELP (5:1-4)

Those three days of fasting and prayer are about to pay off in remarkable ways. Three days later, Esther dresses in her royal robes and goes to stand in the entrance to the court of the palace—this was a life-or-death moment. When King Xerxes saw her standing there, he was pleased with her and invited her to come forward by holding out his golden scepter. When Xerxes asks Esther what she wants (even up to half of his Kingdom), she invites him and Haman to a banquet she'd prepared. Xerxes and Haman immediately came to the banquet where they ate and drank—a lot. The King again asks Esther she wants (again, up to half his kingdom). Esther invites them back for a second banquet the next day—when she will tell him exactly what she wants. They agree.

- How difficult is it for you to ask for help? What makes it difficult?
- We have not because we ask not—whose help do you need? Are you asking?
- How can the group help?

WAIT FOR THE RIGHT TIME (5:5-8)

Haman leaves the banquet in high spirits—until he sees Mordecai—who once again did not rise or show any "fear" in Haman's presence. This again infuriated Haman, but he restrained himself and went home—where he called his family and friends together. He boasted to them about his vast wealth and power, about all the ways the king had honored him, and then—to top it all off—he shared with them that not only had Esther invited him to one banquet, but another one the next day. Even though this should have excited him, Haman couldn't enjoy any of it—because thoughts of Mordecai's insolence were living in his head! His wife, Zeresh, tells Haman to use his power to have gallows built for Mordecai and hang him on it. Then he could go to the dinner and be happy.

Haman was delighted with her suggestion and orders the gallows to be built. He went to bed and likely slept well. It has been said, "All tea bags look alike until you put them in hot water. We will never know the strength and character we have until it's needed."

- Can you think of a time when adversity revealed your character—good or bad?

SOMETIMES GOD USES A SLEEPLESS NIGHT (6:1, 2)

Meanwhile, across the city, the king wasn't sleeping well. In an effort to fall asleep, he asks for the recorded history of his reign to be brought to him. As he's reading, he comes across the account of when Mordecai shared information that saved his life—and Xerxes realizes he hadn't done anything to thank him! He asks if any of his advisers are in the outer court and learns Haman has come in early. Haman is anxious to share his plot of killing Mordecai.

- Is it possible God is trying to reveal something to you when at times you experience sleeplessness?
- What might happen if we ask what lies beneath the insomnia—if we ask God what He wants?

GOD'S TIMING IS PERFECT (6:3-5)

We've already looked at and considered the fact God's timing is always perfect. Some time had passed since Mordecai had saved the king's life. Nothing had ever been done to show gratitude. Realizing this oversight, Xerxes now asks Haman (who thinks Xerxes is talking about him) what should be done for a man the king wants to honor. There are times in all our lives when it feels like we wait and wait and never get an answer—times when it feels like there'll never be resolution. We need to remember—God's timing is always perfect!

- Have you ever felt like God just wasn't listening?
- What's a long-term prayer that's yet unanswered in your life?
- What does it mean to you to wait on the Lord?
- How might the group join you in prayer?

WE NEED TO REMEMBER—IT'S NOT ALWAYS ABOUT US (6:6-9)

The king invites Haman in to discuss how to honor someone the king delights to honor. Haman assumes the king is talking about him—so he outlines all kinds of things he would want the king to do to show him honor: wearing one of the king's robes, riding one of the king's horses, being lead through the city streets with a crier exalting about how great he is. It was perfect—exactly what Haman needed to do to sooth his ego before killing his nemesis, Mordecai.

- Have you ever found yourself in a place similar to Haman—where you've allowed your ego or personality to get in the way?
- What was the outcome?
- What steps might be taken in order to remember it's not always about us?

GOD'S JUSTICE IS SOMETIMES POETIC (6:10-14) (Wait for it!)

Xerxes loves Haman's suggestions and tells him to do exactly that—for Mordecai. Can you imagine how Haman must have felt? When he was done "honoring" Mordecai, Haman went home and grieved to his wife and friends about what had just happened—everything had changed. He could not stand against Mordecai now. As they were talking, the king's eunuchs arrive to take him to banquet #2.

- Can you think of a time when God showed up—and showed off?

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Whom do you need to tell about it?*

Esther 7:1-8:17

So the king and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther, 2 and as they were drinking wine on that second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." 3 Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life — this is my petition. And spare my people — this is my request. 4 For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king." 5 King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?" 6 Esther said, "The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman." Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. 7 The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. 8 Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?" As soon as the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face. 9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, "A gallows seventy-five feet high stands by Haman's house. He had it made for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king." The king said, "Hang him on it!" 10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided.

8:1 That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her. 2 The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate. 3 Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews. 4 Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him. 5 "If it pleases the king," she said, "and if he regards me with favor and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces. 6 For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?" 7 King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have hanged him on the gallows. 8 Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring — for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked." 9 At once the royal secretaries were summoned — on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. They wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. These orders were written in the script of each province and the language of each people and also to the Jews in their own script and language. 10 Mordecai wrote in the name of King Xerxes, sealed the dispatches with the king's

signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king. 11 The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them and their women and children; and to plunder the property of their enemies. 12 The day appointed for the Jews to do this in all the provinces of King Xerxes was the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar. 13 A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies. 14 The couriers, riding the royal horses, raced out, spurred on by the king's command. And the edict was also issued in the citadel of Susa. 15 Mordecai left the king's presence wearing royal garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold and a purple robe of fine linen. And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration. 16 For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. 17 In every province and in every city, wherever the edict of the king went, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them. (NIV)

In our celebration of Memorial Day, we remember all those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for the freedoms we enjoy. As we do, we're reminded the freedom we have isn't free in our country—or in the Kingdom. When it comes to the Kingdom, God's grace always wins!

POINTS FOR US TO CONSIDER:

WHEN ASKING A KING FOR HELP—ASK BOLDLY (7:1-6)

Haman arrives at the second party—it must feel as though his entire world is unraveling. As the king and Haman are drinking, Xerxes again asks Esther for her request—he says he'll give her whatever she wants—up to half of the kingdom. She boldly asks for Xerxes to intervene in the planned destruction, slaughter, and annihilation of her people. She tells Xerxes if the edict had been to be sold again into slavery, she would have been quiet—but she believed the severity of the situation merited disturbing the king. We wonder if Xerxes even knew the level of deceit Haman had exercised. When he asks who did such a thing, Esther named Haman.

Jesus says in Matthew 22:21, 22: *“Truly I tell you,” Jesus replied, “if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”*

- What tends to get in the way of our boldly asking God?
- What mountain do you need moved?
- How might the group join you in praying?

GOD'S JUSTICE IS ALWAYS PERFECT (7:7-10)

At this point, the blood must have run out of Haman's face and his heart must have been pounding out of his chest. The king was enraged as it was obvious he didn't know of Haman's plot. Haman was a dead man. The only thing left to be decided was how he would die. The king walked outside into the garden to collect his thoughts—and Haman began pleading for his life and fell across the couch. When the king walked in on him, he assumed Haman was assaulting Esther. One of the eunuchs attending the king suggested they use the gallows Haman had erected for Mordecai—and Haman was impaled.

Here we find a repetition of a theme from last week. God is using Xerxes to fulfill a promise made to King Saul that wasn't realized because of Saul's disobedience in letting King Agag live. Sometimes our prayers are not answered for generations.

- What are you praying for that only God can accomplish?
- Isaiah 40:31 tells us: *"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."* Is it easy or difficult for you to wait on the Lord—trusting in His timing?
- Are there changes you need to make in your prayer life?

GOD DOESN'T FORGET THE FAITHFUL (8:1, 2)

Xerxes takes immediate action giving Queen Esther all of Haman's estate and holdings and elevates Mordecai to Haman's former position—when Esther reveals she is related to Mordecai. Mordecai wore the king's signet ring, and Esther appointed him over Haman's estate and holdings. What an incredible reversal of fortune—that started with Mordecai reminding Esther of her responsibility—Esther accepting the calling—the three days of prayer and fasting—and a sleepless night for Xerxes. All Haman had planned was quickly undone because of the grace of God oriented toward His people.

- What legacy will you leave for those who come after you?

THERE WILL COME A DAY WHEN ALL WRONGS WILL BE MADE RIGHT (8:3-14)

The king gave permission for Esther and Mordecai to write a new edict reversing the fortunes of the Jews. It was then sent to all the provinces and regions—giving the Jews the right to protect themselves and thus cancelling the prior edict of Haman. For each of us, there are those times and situations that appear hopeless—as though there's no way out. As we see in His Word, God always has the last say—and we have His promise there will be a day when all wrongs will be made right.

- What hope does that give you?
- How will you hold onto that hope?

WHEN GOD MOVES, IT'S IMPORTANT TO CELEBRATE! (8:15-17)

In the end: Esther was Queen, Mordecai was elevated, Susa threw a party (the Feast of Purim), there was great joy and gladness, and people from many other nations became Jewish because of what God had done.

The call is for us to give thanks – give praise – and celebrate!

- How will you do this as an individual? As a group?

RESPOND

- *What do you hear the Holy Spirit saying to you?*
- *What are you going to do about it?*
- *How can the group help?*
- *Whom do you need to tell about it?*