

## ESTHER – PROVIDENCE DISPLAYED

### INTRODUCTION

Since this book is ten chapters, I suggest that you read the entire book. This helps to soak in the story. The story of Esther has always been a favorite of mine. Although ten chapters seem daunting, it's not only a fast read, but an exciting one. It's like a good mystery that you just can't put down.

This story has it all – lavish parties, beauty contests, murder plots, and ultimate victory for the good guys. You can't ask for more than that in a story.

Also, we learn that God's ways are higher than ours. Isaiah 55:8,9 says:

***"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."***

But the most powerful theme that comes from this book of Esther is providence. Providence means: divine guidance. It is when God directs all things – seen and unseen – toward a worthy purpose. Ultimately, God is in charge. Scripture after scripture reminds us that God is sovereign.

Psalms 115:3 says: ***"Our God is in heaven; He does whatever pleases Him."***

Colossians 1:16 states: ***"For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him."***

Providence also means "to provide". God will provide. J. Vernon McGee said it best: "Providence means that the hand of God is in the glove of human events." God can work through ANY situation or any person. He is not intimidated by wealth or power or haughty Persian kings. God is not discouraged when things seem hopeless. Actually, when only God can get the glory for a solution, that's when He really shines.

Interestingly enough, the name of God is never mentioned in this book. Yet every page will bear witness to Him. God Almighty was directing these events like a great director moves a story along from his director's chair. God's influence and power oozes from every detail.

One of the reasons I love the book of Esther so much is that God shows His power through seemingly mundane events. We see no fire from heaven like with Elijah, or a voice speaking through a bush like Moses, or walls falling down with just music and yelling like Joshua at Jericho. It's easy to get excited and rejoice when the miraculous happens. But our lives don't usually play out like that. We are 'nose wipers' and 'toilet cleaners' and 'dinner cooks'. We trudge through our days thinking nothing Godly or miraculous could EVER happen to us. Then God shows up....

Let's dig in and have this remarkable experience together.

### **DAY ONE** – The Party

The story opens with King Xerxes throwing the party to end all parties. He was king over 127 provinces, and he invited a delegation from each province. This would mean at least one to two thousand people for this swanky affair, and it would cost millions of dollars.

We need to understand that Xerxes was the most powerful ruler in the world at that time. He ruled from India to Ethiopia. Persian kings like to flaunt their wealth and usually held huge banquets before going to war. Xerxes was taking this to a whole new level and was basically showing off for his underlings that he was not only the richest guy in the room, but he was also the most clever. This would convince them all to follow him into war.

Why would the richest, most powerful ruler go to war? To get more. He was the ruler in the east, but he wanted to rule the world. To do that he needed to conquer Greece. To conquer Greece, he needed everyone on board. Hence the drunken party.

King Xerxes had thrown a mega party. How many days did the party last (Chapter 1, verse 4)?

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Queen Vashti was asked to do what for the King and his drunken buddies? (verse 11)?

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And what was her response? (verse 12)

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Although Queen Vashti plays a minor role in our story, let's hover here for a bit. Why do you think Vashti wouldn't dance for the king and his drunken buddies?

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Read Ephesians 5:22-24. What does the bible instruct wives to do?

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Define submission: \_\_\_\_\_

Define slavery: \_\_\_\_\_

How do you draw a line between submission and slavery? Read Ephesians 5:28,29 as the basis for your answer:

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King Xerxes was steamed at Vashti for 1) defying him, and 2) for embarrassing him in front of his posse.

He started a heated debate with his drunken advisors, so of course EVERYONE was thinking clearly (sarcasm intended). Memucan, one of the seven nobles who had special access to the king, took the lead on what course of action would be suitable. He seemed to take Vashti's snub personally. Memucan was sporting a major chauvinistic 'tude and grabbed this opportunity to influence the king to think just like him.

Sometimes you can tell a lot about someone by what sets them off. Memucan and his band of brothers....err....advisors were afraid that Vashti's new found self-respect would leak out to the rest of the women in the kingdom. This could seriously jeopardize their slave-holder mentality.

Chapter 1, verse 18b: ***"There will be no end of disrespect and discord."***

Disrespect? Really? Respect between men and women, husband and wife, or any two people comes from mutual regard and appreciation for each other. You can't legislate respect. The most you can get from throwing law at someone is forced obedience for fear of the consequences. This is a poor substitute for love and genuine respect.

But Memucan knew how to promote his agenda. What is the first phrase in verse 19? Write it here:

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A Persian king was considered to be a god by his people. So, they made it when he issued a decree or law it stood forever. Daniel ran into this in Daniel 6:8. He almost become lion's food because of a haughty king being duped by evil.

As we learned in the introduction, King Xerxes was the most powerful ruler of his time. Included in his 127 provinces were thousands of Jews who had chosen not to return to Palestine when Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah took groups of Jews back to the homeland. This was in direct disobedience to God's will. (Put a pin in this information. It comes into play later on.)

Xerxes was accustomed to always getting his way, and always having control. Vashti's refusal unraveled this theory. But we, as believers, know who is REALLY in control.

Another king, Nebuchadnezzar, learned the lesson of God's sovereignty the hard way.

Read Daniel 4:28-37.

Nebuchadnezzar was taking glory for himself that belonged to God. He had no more than uttered the haughty words when God stripped him from power. He lived like an animal until he acknowledged "that the Most High is sovereign over kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes." (Daniel 4:32)

Write Daniel 4:37 here (NIV says it best):

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Here's another reminder. Write Proverbs 16:33 below:

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Even today believers who know the truth that God is sovereign, will fuss and fume over rulers or presidents or legislators that they "think" have control.

**GOD IS ALWAYS PRESENT AND ALWAYS IN CONTROL.**

Say that out loud....I'll wait. Hearing this truth helps to cement it in our brains.

**DAY TWO** – Regret and opportunity

Let's pick back up the story. Xerxes was mad. The rulers gave him bad advice. Vashti was banished.

After Xerxes banished Vashti, do you feel he regretted his decision?  
(Chapter 2, verse 1)

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Is there a time in your life when you made a life-changing decision in anger that you later regretted? Share with the group.

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Now that Xerxes was queen-less and cranky, his personal attendants suggested getting a replacement. This required a beauty pageant. Now Esther enters the story.

What did you learn about Esther and her background?  
(Chapter 2, verse 5-7)

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Let's stop here for a moment and consider our background. Have you allowed something in your past to hinder you from moving forward? Ask God right now to give you the courage to overcome the past and to use any

circumstance in your life for God's glory. With that bit of housekeeping done, let's move on (get it?...move on) ☺

The major advantage with Esther is she allowed God to work through her. She didn't allow beauty or position to go to her head. But she also had some disadvantages. She was an orphan and a Jew. Both of these could have been excuses to derail any successes. But we do not see Esther using her circumstances as a reason not to try.

Chapter 2, verse 5 is our introduction to Mordecai. This was Esther's cousin who had taken her in to raise after the death of her parents. Verse 7 has Esther's name as Hadassah which means "star". And what a star she was. How does verse 7 describe her?

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But Esther wasn't just another pretty face with a figure to match. She was a godly woman and a good Jew. So, in verse 8 when we read "Esther also was taken..." you can surmise that she didn't immediately go willingly. Some Jewish scholars say that this could be interpreted as "taken by force". And Mordecai seems O.K. with it.

Right now you could be annoyed with Mordecai, but remember the theme of our study – providence. It all works out, I promise.

### **DAY THREE** – Beauty on parade

A new character appears in chapter 2, verse 8. His name is Hegai. He was the man put in charge of the harem. Before you shake your head saying "This is like putting the fox in charge of the hen house", let's explain a major feature of Hegai. He was a eunuch. This means he had been castrated before being employed to guard the women in an oriental court. I'm not certain there would be a long line of potential employees for this position, but Hegai wielded a lot of power. There were lots of women brought in for this beauty pageant and Hegai could make or break them by what supplies he gave or withheld.

How did Hegai feel about Esther? (verse 9)

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What special treatment did Esther receive? (verse 9)

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Esther had a BIG secret. But Mordecai had forbidden her to tell it. What was the secret? (verse 10)

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Once the women were assembled, they started a beauty regiment that makes Hollywood starlets look like plain Janes. There was twelve months of pampering and applying goop. Each woman realized just how much they had riding on winning this contest. Because if they lost, they would become just another concubine in the harem. They would never be allowed back into society and they would probably never be summoned back to the king again. They would live in the palace but just with the other women of the harem. It was a lonely and sad life.

In the next few verses, we learn a little more about Esther's character. There are at least four attractive qualities that stand out.

1. Grace and elegance. Verse 9 says "The girl pleased him (Hegai) and won his favor. In Hebrew, the first sentence literally states: "She lifted up grace before his face." Gracious behavior is a rarity these days. As women we sometimes find ourselves in a man's world, competing for title and position. We mistakenly believe that displaying grace and charm will represent us as being weak. This couldn't be further from the truth. I've been in the business world for 40+ years. Trust me when I tell you that men find brash behavior from a woman off-putting. You can be a woman and be gentle. You can be a woman and be gracious. You can be a woman and survive (and thrive) in the business world. The key is to allow God to work through you – just like Esther.
2. Unusual restraint. Verse 10 says: "Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background." This character trait not only made Esther stand out during the pageant preparations, but served Esther well after she became queen. Remember, you don't have to blab everything you know. Not every thought needs to be verbalized. Restraint in words and actions showing maturity and gives you an air of mystery that the world finds enticing.

3. Teachable spirit. Verse 10b tells us: "...because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so." We already know that Esther was a beauty. But that beauty didn't go to her head. Sometimes the more popular, the more physically "blessed", the more prominent we are, the less teachable we become. We mistakenly believe that any of these things are because of us, instead of accepting them as blessings from the sovereign God – who gives and who takes away.
  
4. Modesty. Verses 12-14 gives us the rules for the beauty pageant. After the twelve months of beauty treatments, each girl would have one night with the king. Talk about pressure! There would be no do-overs for having a surprise zit or nerves causing you to dissolve in a pile of giggles or sobs. You get one chance to impress the king and you can choose anything from the harem to take with you. I'm sure this competition was cut-throat and each woman was grabbing the best stuff for herself. But not Esther. Verse 15 says: "...she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested."

What was the result? Write the last sentence of verse 15 below:

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Have you ever seen a woman that exudes such beauty and grace that you are almost speechless? Men drool and want to be with her and women just want TO BE her. That was Esther.

She had all the right stuff. And now she captured the eyes and the heart of King Xerxes. After being with Esther, he was probably saying "Vashti who?" And, because this is how Xerxes shows off, he threw his new queen, Esther, a big party. You would think he would have backed off the partying after the debacle from before, but NO. He not only gave a banquet in her honor, but he declared a holiday and started handing out gifts "with royal liberality" (verse 18b). Boy was he smitten. This would serve Esther well as we move the story forward.

If the story ended right here it would say "And they lived happily ever after." Instead, we have a dramatic, evil interlude.

## **DAY FOUR** – A conspiracy foiled/evil enters

Read Chapter 2, verses 19-23.

Just when we start gaining traction in our story about Esther, it abruptly stops and gives us what would seem to be a trivial story about Mordecai.

It seems that Mordecai was sitting at the gate and overheard an assassination plot between two guys – Bigthana and Teresh. They were officers of the king and for reason unknown they wanted to kill Xerxes. Mordecai reported what he had heard to Queen Esther and she, in turn, told the king, giving credit to Mordecai.

Bigthana and Teresh were executed and the event was recorded in the official book of events of the king. Basically business as usual....well except for Bigthana and Teresh. It was kind of a defining day for them. But you would think something as big as saving the king's life would get more than a passing mention in some book. Maybe a promotion or a cash reward. But nothing happened. And Mordecai didn't whine or complain to Esther. He just went on with life. But remember our theme – providence. Even though the king forgot, God did not.

Let's repeat what we learned on page 4:

### **GOD IS ALWAYS PRESENT AND ALWAYS IN CONTROL.**

So, we now have the two bad guys dead, gone, and forgotten. But they weren't the only bad guys introduced. Chapter 3 introduces a bad guy that makes Bigthana and Teresh look like bumbling fools.

Enter Haman.

Read Chapter 3, verses 1-6

What was Haman's heritage and position in government described in Chapter 3, verse 1?

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Why was Haman so mad at Mordecai?

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It's important to note that Haman is described as "Haman, the Agagite". We need a little history here to understand the depth of Haman's hatred. He was a direct descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king that Samuel killed (1 Samuel 15). This made the Amalekites bitter enemies of the Jews, and was passed down generation to generation to Haman.

It didn't help matters that Mordecai not only had a low-level position in the government, but that he wasn't impressed with Haman and his title. Even when everyone else bowed down, Mordecai stubbornly refused. There were two reasons for this:

1. Bowing down to any human was considered idolatry by a Jew.
2. Mordecai would NEVER show respect to an Amalekite, an enemy of the Jews.

The kind of hate that Haman had, left unchecked, spells disaster. And just in case you think this could never happen again, remember the Holocaust. This was hatred for the Jewish nation that planned the genocide of an entire race.

Since the first two brothers in Genesis displayed differing methods for worshipping God, there has been jealousy and hate that led to murder. We are all capable of this kind of hate.

Read Proverbs 26:23-25. Write verse 24 below:

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What warning does verse 25 give us about hateful people?

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We need to clarify something here. Haman was hatching a plot to destroy Mordecai and all God's people – the Jews. As we point our finger to the problem, it lands directly on Haman, not God. It was his hate that grew and overcame him. He lived for hate and all the consequences. And hate ALWAYS has consequences. The world wants to blame God for every disaster. God does not create the world's problems, yet (as we have learned), He is ALWAYS present and always in control. But we sometimes

have to endure the consequences of being in a broken world. This does not minimize God sovereignty or His power. This concept is clearly at play in the book of Esther.

### DAY FIVE – wrap up

C.S. Lewis noted:

“When souls become wicked, they will certainly use this possibility to hurt one another; and this, perhaps, accounts for four-fifths of the sufferings of men. It is men, not God, who have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets, and bombs.”

We have seen in our story so far the contrast between the righteous and the wicked. Psalm 1 lays out this contrast.

Read Psalm 1. List some of these contrasts.

Righteous

Wicked

What path is your life taking? Has hate dictated your actions? Have you allowed resentment to grow until it has consumed you?

Pray and ask God for forgiveness. He will help you be that ***"tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers."*** (Psalm 1:3)

Until next week – when the plot thickens – I remain,  
Sheryl, aka all `round good egg