

## Small Group Questions | January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019

### *The Great Explorers — Esther Part 1*

#### *Esther 1:1–12; 4:4–17*

*Context: Esther chapters 1–4*

*Other Passages Referenced: Romans 8:28*

### Background Helps

**Providence** – God’s providence is a theological concept demonstrated throughout the Bible. Bible scholar, Karen Jobes, writes, “The Book of Esther is perhaps the most striking biblical statement of what systematic theologians call the providence of God. That God, in some invisible and inscrutable way, governs all creatures, actions, and circumstances through the normal and the ordinary course of human life, without the intervention of the miraculous.” *The Application Commentary*, p.43.

**Feasts in Esther** – Feasts play an important role in the Book of Esther. The word translated “feast/banquet” occurs 20 times in Esther, with much of the plot hinging on what happens at the feasts. The word is only used 46 times in the entire Hebrew Bible.

**Perspective on Mordecai and Esther** – Mordecai was Esther’s uncle “the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, <sup>6</sup> who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away” (Esther 2:5–6). Since the story of Esther took place after the Babylonian captivity and exile (a 70-year period), Mordecai was born in Israel and at least several years older than 70. He was raising his younger cousin, the orphaned Esther as his own daughter. Esther is described as a “young woman” in Esther 2:7. Esther had never lived in or seen Israel but grew up in a Persian world, speaking a Persian language. Her understanding of her Jewish faith was probably limited to what her parents and Mordecai instilled in her.

**Timeline** – The first three chapters of Esther cover a period of seven years. 1:3 describes the first huge feast as happening in the third year of the King’s reign. Esther does not become queen until four years later in the seventh year of his reign (2:16). She is in her fifth year as queen when Haman casts Pur, deciding to exterminate the Jewish people throughout the kingdom (3:7).

**Historic Connection Between the Lines of Benjamin and Agag** –Haman is introduced as “the Agagite,” an intentional reference to the tension between the Israelites and the Amalekites. This enmity stems from the time of the exodus when Israel fought with Amalek in the wilderness. Exodus 17:15 foretells that the Lord would be at war with them from “generation to generation.” Balaam’s oracle (Num 24:7) predicts that the Israelite king would “be greater than Agag” (the Amalekite royal title). The ancient feud between the Israelites and the Amalekites is reported in 1 Sam 15. Agag was king of the Amalekites. Saul the Benjamite, son of Kish (1 Sam 9:1–2) was directed to destroy totally the Amalekites but failed to do so even though he won the war.<sup>1</sup> This incident points to the danger of thinking we can be content with gaining control over something that God has instructed us to do away with completely. Even so, the providence of God does for His people what His people have failed to do to save themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, vol. 10, electronic ed., The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 326.

**Haman's Date for Jewish Annihilation** – Here is another sign of God's providence. In seeking what date Haman should annihilate the Jewish people, the date he ascertained from casting the Pur (lots) fell on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the twelfth month (Adar) of the Jewish lunar calendar. However, Haman sent the edict on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the first month (Nisan), which just happened to be the first day of Passover. The Jews in exile that year were fasting during Passover (Esther 4:15–16). There was an 11-month window between sending the edict and executing it.

**Sermon Recap:** The Book of Esther describes the challenges Jewish people outside of Israel were facing, living as foreigners in a foreign land after their 70 years of captivity in Babylon. The Jewish people of the time had to answer such questions as, "How do we live as the religious minority?" "How do we relate to the dominant culture without losing our identity?" "How do we remain faithful in a culture that values wealth, power, position, beauty, and sex?" The Big Idea from the sermon is: "Esther is an explorer who perceives her part in the providence of God and perishes." That is, she perishes in the sense of being willing to lose everything, including her life, to save her people. If God uses a king nicknamed "headache," a cruel egomaniac Haman, whose name fittingly means "wrath," and an orphaned Jewish girl he places as Queen of Persia, how might His providence use you for the benefit of others?

**Hook:** *A Question to Help Ignite Conversation*

*What makes you feel pampered or helps you get recharged when you feel worn down?*

**Look:**

**Read Esther 2:19–23**

1. This event is actually Act 1 of a two-act display of God's providence at work. Next week, we'll see the same act resurface in Esther chapter 6. How do we see God's providence at work here in the lives of Mordecai and the king?

**Read Esther 3:1–7**

2. Why does Mordecai reveal his Jewish ethnicity after having told Esther to keep it a secret?

**Read Esther 4:1–17**

3. Why is Esther hesitant to follow Mordecai's command to go to the king to plead the case of the Jewish people?
4. What does Mordecai's response to Esther in 4:13–14 reveal about Mordecai's trust in God's providence?
5. When Esther has the Jewish people fast on her behalf, it is not to discern what she should do, but for the providence of God to work out the king's response. What is the decision Esther is already committed to doing?

**Illustrations:**

Illustrations and quotes can be found on the "Sermon Slides" link at the bottom of [www.wcchapel.org](http://www.wcchapel.org)

**Took:** *Applying the message to our lives.*

**Practical Applications:**

1. In God's sovereign providence, He has a purpose and time for everyone. Though we may feel our lives fall prey to circumstances beyond our control, a core biblical belief is that God has placed us, or at least allowed us, to be where we are geographically, economically, vocationally, etc. Can you think of how Mordecai's question to Esther in 4:14 might apply to a situation in your life — "And who knows whether you have not come to the [kingdom] place God has you right now for such a time?"
2. Can you think of an example of "perishing" to follow Jesus in your own life?
3. The culture around the palace valued wealth, power, position, beauty, and sex. Do you find one or more of those values negatively impacting your relationship with God? ... relationships with others?
4. Considering "The Problem of the Palace," figuratively speaking, are there pleasures and comforts of your position "in the palace" that tempt you to keep silent for fear of losing them? Do you see your "palace" as a platform to influence others for God's Kingdom or as a place of personal comfort and security?

**Verse (You might consider memorizing this one):** "For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" – Esther 4:14

**Prayer:**

- Please spend time praying for one another.