

## 20 The Life of Queen Esther

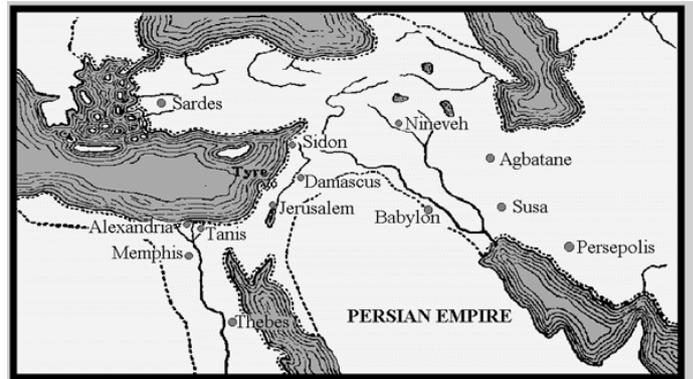
The life of Esther is found in the Bible book that has her name: Esther. Esther was a Jewish girl who lived in Persia about 2500 years ago. Persia is the country we know today as Iran.

### The captivity of the Jewish people

The Jewish people had disobeyed God – they had not kept His Laws, and so God sent armies from Babylon to take over the land of Israel. What happened to the Jewish people? Many people were killed. Many became slaves and were scattered all over the world. Some went to Babylon where they started new lives. But they went to Babylon with nothing – no money, no possessions.

The amazing thing was that the Jewish people never forgot who they were. That they were God's chosen people, that they were the children of Abraham; that they had to keep God's Law. We find that even in a foreign country, the Jews stayed separate. That is, they did not lose their identity as Jews. Even today, there are people who are Jews in many parts of the world, but they have kept their identity.

The kingdom of Babylon was destroyed after many years, and the Medes and Persians ruled that part of the world. Esther was a Jewish girl who lived in the city of Shushan in Persia with her uncle Mordecai. Esther's mother and father were dead – Mordecai cared for Esther like she was his own daughter.



### The search for a Queen of Persia

The king of Persia at the time was King Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes I - he reigned from 485 to 464 BC). One day, he gave a great party where all the important men in the country and in the government were invited. Now in those times, a party at the palace lasted for many days. At the same time, the Queen of Persia, Queen Vashti was having a party for the women. During the party, King Ahasuerus ordered Queen Vashti to come before all the men so that everyone could see how beautiful she was. But Vashti said "No!" She was too busy to come before the King. Of course, saying "no" to a King was the wrong thing to do. King Ahasuerus was angry, and after talking with his officials, declared that Vashti was no longer the Queen.

All the young women in the Kingdom were brought to the palace so that a new queen could be chosen. The best one would be the new queen of Persia.

Esther was also gathered with the other young women in Shushan, and she was taken into the palace. Mordecai visited Esther each day, and had told her not to tell anyone that she was Jewish. (2:10-11)

There have been many people in history who have hated the Jews. In the 20th century, Adolf Hitler and the Nazis of Germany caused millions of Jews to be killed. In Persia at the time of Esther, there was a man named Haman, a high official of the King. He also hated the Jews, and it was better that no-one knew that Esther was Jewish.

The preparation for the women took one year, but at the end, Esther was found to be the best woman, and she was married to King Ahasuerus and was crowned as the Queen of Persia. (2:17-18)

Mordecai visited the palace frequently to see how Queen Esther was going. On one visit, Mordecai overheard two of the King's officials talking. They were going to murder the King! Mordecai reported this to the King, and the two men were executed. So King Ahasuerus now knew of Mordecai, but did not know that he was related to Esther.

### The plot to kill the Jews in Persia

Shortly after this, the King promoted Haman. Everyone had to bow down to Haman. But Mordecai would not bow down. It was against the Law of God. Haman was very angry, and decided to get rid of all the Jews in Persia. (3:1-6)

Haman worked out a plan to kill all the Jews in Persia on the same day. And if the King let him do this, Haman would give all the money and possessions of the Jews to the King's 'Bank'. Haman went to the King to ask him to do this, but never told the King who the people to be destroyed were. The King did not know that his wife was Jewish, and that she too would be killed with the rest of her people. The King signed the decree that on a certain day, all the evil people in the Kingdom of Persia would be killed. (3:8-15)

Queen Esther was in a difficult position. Should she speak out and say she was Jewish? Should she say nothing, and watch while her people all over Persia were massacred?

Mordecai asked her to go to the King and speak to him. Esther answered that no-one could just go to the King's throne without being invited by the King. To do so would be to risk death. Esther could be killed before she could tell the King what the problem was. But she decided to go before the King and plead for him to stop the command of Haman.

Esther went before the King, and he was pleased to see her. The King knew that she wanted to ask him something. Esther asked the King and Haman to come to a dinner. The dinner was held, but Esther did not ask the King about her people. She asked them to come back to another dinner the next day. Of course, Haman was very happy. You had to be very important to be invited to a private dinner with just the King and Queen. But all this meant nothing when he saw Mordecai at the gate of the palace refusing to bow to him. Haman's wife suggested that Haman should have a gallows built and ask the King to hang Mordecai on it. (5:9-14)

It looked like Esther would have trouble asking the King to save her people. And it looked like Mordecai would be hanged. But that night, God worked to change everything.

That night, King Ahasuerus could not sleep, and he asked one of his servants to read the Persian records. The servant read the part where Mordecai had saved the King's life. The King asked had Mordecai been rewarded for his good work. "None" was the reply. (6:1-3) Just then Haman came to the palace. He was going to ask the King to hang Mordecai. But before he could ask, the King asked him how he would reward a man who had done a great deed for the king. Haman thought the King wanted to honour him, so he answered in 6:7-8. The King was delighted with Haman's idea, and ordered him to do it for Mordecai. "Hasten, take the robe and the horse, as you have suggested, and do so for Mordecai the Jew who sits within the king's gate. Leave nothing undone of all that you have spoken." Haman did all for Mordecai, and Haman went home in shame. He had to do all this for a man that he totally hated. It was the beginning of the end for Haman.

He went off to the dinner with the King and Queen Esther. This time, Esther told the King what the real problem was. Her people would be massacred all over Persia because of the evil of one man: Haman! (7:1-6). The King was furious and went outside. Haman really wanted to destroy all the Jews, including his wife and Mordecai, a man who had saved the King's life. Haman bowed before Esther and pleaded for his life. The king returned and saw Haman as if he was attacking the Queen. (7:7-8). The King was then told that Haman had built a gallows to hang Mordecai. The King ordered that Haman should be hanged on it himself. (7:9-10).

But the decree to kill all the Jews was still to come. The decree had to be changed. Mordecai was appointed as one of the King's trusted officials. He sent messages throughout all the Persian Kingdom that on the day of the massacre, all the Jews could rise against their enemies.

The Jews were saved, and to this day, the Jews have a festival called Purim where they remember how God saved them through the work of Queen Esther and her uncle Mordecai.

## **Conclusion**

What do we learn from the book of Esther? We learn that God cares for his people wherever they are. We have to trust God that he will care for us, and he will bring us through the difficult days. We follow Jesus Christ. If we trust God, we know that we will come to the Kingdom of God that will soon come.