

Bible Stories for Adults

Esther

Esther

Opening

Gathering: Where have you seen someone who is clearly fulfilling the purpose that God set for them?

Today's Focus: God blessed Esther with the queenship of Persia for the greater purpose of saving His people and making His name know.

Key Verses: *Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?* Esther 4:14

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. Romans 8:28

Opening Prayer

Lesson

A Quick History of the Jews in the Promised Land

What kind of government did Israel have after settling in the Promised Land?

Judges 17:6 = *In those days Israel had no king; loose confederacy, no central ruler*

How did this change after years of trouble with the neighboring Philistines?

1 Samuel 8:19-20 = They wanted a king *to be like all the other nations*

Who selected Israel's first king?

1 Samuel 9:15-17 = The Lord chose Saul and told Samuel to anoint him as king

Did David replace Saul because of his personal ambitions to become king?

1 Samuel 16:1, 11-12 = God chose him; David never tried to take kingship from Saul

How did God react when David's son and Israel's third king, Solomon, grew unfaithful?

1 Kings 11:9-13 = Split nation, Gave Judah to Rehoboam & rest to Jeroboam

What happened over the next 200 years to the northern nation of Israel?

2 Kings 17:21-23 = They immediately turned from God, so he gave them over to Assyria

What happened to the southern nation of Judah after its 350 years of existence?

Jeremiah 25:4-5, 8-9 = They followed the evil ways of Israel, God gave them over to Babylon

What happened while the Jews were in exile in Babylon?

Daniel 5:22-23, 30-31 = Babylon was conquered by Persia

What great thing happened to the Jews during the reign of Darius' successor, Cyrus?

Ezra 1:1-3 = Cyrus allowed Jews to return to rebuild the temple (70 yrs of captivity)



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The Book of Esther (*Esther 1:1-2*)

At what point in the Jews' history does this story of Esther take place? = citadel - *palace*
Esther 1:1-2 = During Xerxes' reign, 54 yrs after 1st return (Cyrus), 25 yrs before Ezra
537 Jews return under Cyrus to rebuild temple
516 Temple completed
473 First Purim (Esther)
458 Ezra goes to Jerusalem
445 Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem

The name of God is never stated, mentioned, or even referred to in this book
It tells a strong story of how God takes care of and saves His people
What does Paul say hundreds of years later that summarizes this book?
Romans 8:28 = *In all things God works for the good of those who love Him*
What key verse in this story gives a powerful lesson for our own lives?
Esther 4:14 = *You may have come to your current position for such a time as this*

Xerxes Throws a Party (*Esther 1*)

How proud was Xerxes of the wealth and power he had? = also Ahasuerus - *mighty prince*
Esther 1:4-5, 9 (3-9) = Held open house for 6 months, then threw a 7-day banquet for all
How did the banquet end on a sour note? = *Vashti - beauty*
Esther 1:10a, 11-12 (10-12) = Queen Vashti refused Xerxes' command to be presented
Why did the Persians believe this was a threat to the nation?
Esther 1:16-18 (13-18) = Women everywhere will follow her lead and disobey their husbands
What did Xerxes do to prevent this disaster?
Esther 1:19, 22 (19-22) = Deposed Vashti and commanded all women to obey their husbands

Vashti Replaced (*Esther 2*)

How was Xerxes to find a suitable replacement for Queen Vashti?
Esther 2:2, 4, 12 (1-4) = Many virgins were added to Xerxes' harem for 1 year of training
Who was Esther? = Hadassah – *myrtle* (Hebrew), Esther – *star* (Persian)
Esther 2:5a, 7-8 (5-9) = Beautiful Jewish girl raised by cousin, selected for Xerxes' harem
How did the contest turn out? = 4 years after Vashti was deposed (v16)
Esther 2:17 (12-18) = Esther was selected and made queen
How could a Jew become queen of the Persian empire?
Esther 2:10-11 = She never let it known that she was a Jew, Mordecai stayed in touch
How did Mordecai's concern for Esther help save Xerxes?
Esther 2:21-23 (19-23) = He heard of plot to kill Xerxes and reported it to Esther

Haman Commands Destruction of Jews (*Esther 3*)

How did Mordecai's faithfulness to God get him and others in trouble? = 4 years later (v7)
Esther 3:1-2, 5-6 (1-6) = He wouldn't bow to Haman, who decided to destroy all Jews
How would Haman get Xerxes' approval to destroy the Jews?
Esther 3:8-9, 11 (8-11) = He warned of national threat by a group that refused to obey laws
How would Haman accomplish this goal of getting rid of all Jews throughout the empire?
Esther 3:13 (12-15) = Sent commands throughout the empire to destroy all Jews on March 7
How had Haman selected this date?
Esther 3:7 = He cast lots (the *pur*, plural is *purim*)

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Who Will Stand up for the Jews? (*Esther 4*)

How did the Jews respond to this decree?

Esther 4:1-3 (1-10) = They were in great distress over the impending holocaust

Why couldn't Esther just go talk to Xerxes and ask for his help?

Esther 4:11 = Anyone who came to the king without being summoned could be killed

How did Mordecai convince her that she should put her neck on the line and go to Xerxes?

Esther 4:12-14 = God will somehow deliver His people; this may be why you're queen

What help did Esther want from the rest of the local Jews?

Esther 4:15-16 (15-17) = To fast and pray 3 days for God to be with her

Esther Steps Out with God's Strength (*Esther 5*)

How did Xerxes respond to Esther appearing before him without his request?

Esther 5:2-3 (1-3) = He was glad to see her and anxious to give her whatever she wanted

Did Esther immediately make her request to Xerxes?

Esther 5:4-5 = She invited Xerxes and Haman to come to a banquet

Did she make her request then?

Esther 5:6-8 = No, she invited them to another banquet the next day

How did Haman feel about Esther's invitations?

Esther 5:11-12 (9-12) = He was proud of his greatness

What did Haman's inflated head then lead him to do?

Esther 5:13-14 = He had a gallows built for hanging Mordecai

Mordecai's Fate (*Esther 6*)

What did Xerxes remember that night when he had insomnia?

Esther 6:1-3 = That Mordecai had never been rewarded for saving him

Who happened to walk in at that time and what happened? = Haman came for ok to hang Mordecai

Esther 6:6-9 (4-9) = Haman thought Xerxes wanted to honor him, suggested procession

How was Haman surprised?

Esther 6:10-13 = He was told to personally honor Mordecai in this way

Haman's Fate (*Esther 7*)

What did Esther finally request from Xerxes during the banquet on the second day?

Esther 7:3-4 (6:14-7:4) = For her life and the lives of the Jews

How did Xerxes respond?

Esther 7:5-7 = He was furious at what Haman had done, left to consider his options

How did Haman further seal his fate?

Esther 7:8-9 (8-10) = Xerxes thought Haman was molesting Esther, had him hung

How else did Xerxes try to right Haman's wrongs against Esther and Mordecai?

Esther 8:1-2 = Gave Haman's estate to Esther; Esther placed Mordecai over estate

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The King's Edict (*Esther 8-9:17*)

Did Xerxes' justice satisfy Esther?

Esther 8:3 (3-6) = No, she still wanted salvation for the Jews from Haman's plan

Why couldn't Xerxes just repeal the law that Haman had made in his name?

Daniel 6:15 = No law made by a Persian king could be repealed or altered

How did Xerxes decide to solve this dilemma?

Esther 8:7-8 (7-10) = He gave Mordecai authorization to make whatever decree he wanted

What decree did Mordecai make that solved this problem?

Esther 8:11-12 (11-17) = He gave the Jews the right to defend themselves on March 7

How did things turn out? = Killed over 75K, but did not take the plunder (v10)

Esther 9:1-3 (1-17) = The Jews defeated those who tried to kill them, Officials helped Jews

The Festival of Purim (*Esther 9:18-10*)

How were the Jews to remember this great saving act of God? = Feasting, joy, give food, gifts to poor

Esther 9:20-22 (18-22) = An annual festival was set for Adar 14 & 15

What was this festival called and why?

Esther 9:24, 26a (23-32) = Purim, plural of the word *pur* (lot)

How was a regular Jew like Mordecai able to command the setting of this great festival?

Esther 10:3 (1-3) = Mordecai was placed second in command to Xerxes

Note: Persian records identify an official in Xerxes administration named Mardukaya

How Purim is Celebrated Today

A central part of the celebration is hearing the reading of the book of Esther multiple times

Children act out the story as it is read, Elaborate costumes are made and worn

Esther and Mordecai are the great heroes

Haman is the great villain, A lot of noise is made when Haman's name is mentioned

Booing, stamping on the floor, beating pots & pans, spinning noisemakers

People write "Haman" on bottoms of shoes and grind their soles into the floor

Triangular pastries represent Haman's hat, eaten to show dislike of Haman

Closing Prayer

Response - Consider and meditate on one each day this week

1. When have I rejected the authority of someone above me, and what consequences did I realize? (*Esther 1:12-19; Matthew 17:24-27; 22:15-22; 23:2-3; Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-14*)
2. When has God shown His favor to me in front of others? (*Esther 2:15-18; Exodus 3:21-22; Deut. 10:15; 1 Samuel 2:26; Isaiah 62:4-5; Luke 1:30, 41-42; 2:52; Acts 2:46-47; 1 John 3:21-23*)
3. What have I done that has caused grief or trouble for others? (*Esther 3:8-4:3; Genesis 34:30; Exodus 5:20-23; Judges 11:30-40; Matthew 18:5-7; Acts 7:54-8:3; Romans 5:12-21*)
4. For what purposes might God have brought me to this point in my life? (*Esther 4:14; Genesis 50:20; Isaiah 30:1; Jeremiah 29:11-13; Luke 7:29-30; Romans 5:6; Colossians 4:2-6; 1 Peter 3:15*)
5. From what "inevitable" crises have God rescued me? (*Esther 9:20-27; Exodus 14; Judges 6:1-16; Job 5:19-20; Psalm 18:4-6, 16-19; 91; Daniel 3:6; Acts 12:1-11; Galatians 1:3-5; 2 Peter 2:4-9*)

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The Feast of Purim

Shabbat Shekalim: The Shabbat before the month of Adar officially welcomes the Purim season. This special Shabbat is called *Shabbat Shekalim*, Hebrew for the Sabbath of Shekals (an ancient form of Israelite money.)

Shabbat Shekalim is honored with the reading of an additional Torah portion dedicated to *tzedakah*, giving charity, a mitzvah associated with Esther. This special Torah reading is taken from Exodus 30:11-16, which describes the giving of a half-shekel in support of the Temple's sacrificial offerings.

A special *haftorah*, a selection from the prophets read immediately following the Torah portion, is also read on Shabbat Shekalim. It is taken from Kings II 11:17-12:17, in which King Jehoash collects money for repairing the Temple.

Shabbat Zachor: The Sabbath immediately preceding Purim is called *Shabbat Zachor*, the Sabbath of Remembrance. On this Sabbath, the Torah portion recalls the Jews' exodus from Egypt when Amalek, son of Eliphaz, and grandson of Jacob's brother Esau, tried to destroy the Jews at their most vulnerable moment. The Torah reading describes how Amalek and his nation attacked the Jews just as they escaped slavery, and a pursuing Egyptian army, immediately after they crossed the parted Red Sea.

It is a special mitzvah for both Jewish men and women to hear this Torah portion read. The Torah commands:

Remember what Amalek did to you on the road as you came out of Egypt- how he met you on the road and with no reverence for G-d, attacked all your stragglers in the rear, those who were famished and weary. Therefore, when the Lord our G-d grants you safety from your enemies, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. Do Not Forget! (Deuteronomy 25:17-19; Exodus 17:8-16)

The Haftorah read on *Shabbat Zachor* is taken from Samuel I 15:1-34, which describes how King Saul had the chance to destroy all of Amalek, but instead, took pity on King Agag, and spared his life. The Prophet Samuel severely chastised King Saul for his misguided pity and killed the Amalek king himself, but not before the king had the opportunity to return home and father a child. Haman was a direct descendant of Agag.

It is fascinating to note that it was Mordechai, son of Yair, son of Shimi, son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who helped destroy Haman the Amalekite. Mordechai, a descendant of King Saul, carried out generations later what his ancestor failed to accomplish.

Amalek: In a history with so many enemies, why was Amalek's crime considered so heinous that Jews are specifically commanded to literally *stamp out* his name?

The reason, our rabbis say, is because Amalek preyed on the weak and sought the Jews destruction. Haman, like his Amalekite ancestors, also wanted the Jew's physical destruction.

So, the Shabbat preceding Purim, before we can let ourselves go and enjoy the carnival-like atmosphere of Purim, we, as Jews, are reminded of the kind of evil that is out there, the kind that wants nothing more than the total extermination of the Jewish people.

Fast of Esther: On the thirteenth of Adar, the day before Purim, Jews observe a fast day in memory of Esther who asked the Jews of Shushan to fast and pray for three days before she risked approaching King Ahashveurosh to rescind Haman's evil decree.

It was in response to Mordecai's urging that Esther asked the King for a special audience. This was done at great personal risk, since no one was allowed to enter the King's court without being called. If they did, and the King's scepter was not outstretched, they were put to death.

Like all Jewish fast days, eating, drinking, wearing leather shoes, washing and engaging in sexual activity is prohibited.

Megillah Readings: The Book of Esther, which is one single scroll, is read out loud. It is first read on the eve of Purim, at the conclusion of the fast. The Megillah is chanted with its own melody before the entire congregations at the synagogue. If you are unable to attend Megillah reading at the synagogue, it is permissible to have the Megillah read to you at home.

As with all sacred scrolls, the Megillah reading is preceded by three blessings:

The First Blessing: *Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, ruler of the universe, who has made us holy with your commandments and has commanded us about reading the Megillah*

The Second Blessing: *Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, ruler of the universe, who performed miracles for our fathers in these days at this time of year.*

The Third Blessing: *Blessed are You Lord our G-d ruler of the universe who has given us life, lifted us up and brought us to this moment.*

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After the Megillah, a final blessing is recited:

Blessed are you Lord our G-d, King of the universe, who has contended for us and defeated our cause, avenging us by bringing retribution on all our mortal enemies and delivering us from our adversaries. Blessed are You, Lord, who delivers His people from all their adversaries-G-d who saves.

Special Passages: In the synagogue the Megillah is chanted in a tune passed down through our oral tradition. As the reader comes to the following four passages he stops and waits for the congregation to first read them out loud and in unison. Once said, the passages are chanted by the reader.

- There was a Jew in Shushan....” (2:4)
- And Mordechai left the King’s presence in royal robes...” (8:15)
- For the Jews there was light and joy, gladness and honor...” (8:16) For Mordechai the Jew ranked next to Achashveirosh...” (10:3)
- The passage beginning, “That night, sleep deserted the King...” (6:1), is chanted with a different melody, signifying a major plot change, specifically, the turning of the tide in favor of the Jews

Purim Day: On Purim morning the Megillah is again read. It is a mitzvah for both men and women to hear every word of the Megillah. Therefore, you will find very little talking during Megillah readings in most synagogues, except, of course, when the name Haman is recited.

Costumes: It is a custom to arrive to shul in costume. This is true of adults as well as children, but mostly children. The dress up aspect of Purim adds to its carnival nature. Children and adults sometimes spend weeks planning costumes. Most people dress up as the lead characters of the Purim story, but it has also become acceptable to dress up as contemporary political and historical figures.

Children love to dress in costume and, after the Megillah reading, many synagogues hold Purim parades or Purim *shpiels*, small plays with lots of silly jokes, with judges and prizes for the best costume. This also helps ensure good behavior during the lengthy reading of the Megillah.

Graggers: *Gragger* is Yiddish for a noisemaker. In Hebrew they are called *Ra’ashanim* which means to make a lot of noise. *Graggers* come in many shapes and sizes. Any kind of noisemaker, such as horns or party favors, will do. What is important is that you use them every time the name Haman is read out loud. Haman’s name first appears in chapter 3.

Mishloach Manot: It is a special mitzvah to send food packages or baskets to friends and relatives on Purim. This custom finds its origins in the Megillah when Mordechai declared the holiday of Purim as a time “of feasting and gladness and of sending food to one another, as well as gifts to the poor.”

The only requirement is that the food baskets, or in Yiddish, *shalach-manot*, contain at least two different foods that require two separate blessings, and that you send them to at least two different people.

Baskets may be simple or elaborate. There are religious organizations that put packages together for a fee, or you can put the baskets together yourself. The food baskets must be hand delivered through a *shaliach* or representative, which is usually a small child. *Shalach-manot* are usually delivered the day of Purim.

Matanot L’evyonim: Gifts to the poor was the second requirement Mordechai made for Purim. Today, it is customary to make donations to charitable organizations, often in lieu of sending dozens of elaborate food packages. Often, people send a couple of *shalach-manot* to fulfill the mitzvah, and for the rest, send out donation cards indicating that a donation was made to such and such charity in lieu of *shalach-manot*.

Hamantashen: *Hamentashen* is the traditional food eaten on Purim. These are small, three-cornered cakes filled with fruit jams or poppy seeds. *Hamentashen* is Yiddish for Haman’s pockets, or in Hebrew, *Oznei Haman*, which means Haman’s ears. The three-cornered shape is supposed to look like the hat that Haman was said to have worn.

Purim Seudah: In the late afternoon, it is customary for family and friends to gather for a festive meal, or Purim *seudah*. There are no specific rituals for the *seudah*. Just have fun being together.

Shushan Purim: Because it took the Jews of Shushan, a walled city, an extra day to fight their enemies, they did not rest until the 15th of Adar. For this reason, the rabbis said that all walled cities should observe Purim on the 15th day of Adar instead of the 14th. Today, this only applies to the Jews of Jerusalem, also a walled city, who observe Purim on the 15th, while friends or family members in cities like Tel Aviv, celebrate a day earlier.

Purim Katan: During the Jewish Leap Year, there is a second month of Adar, which is called *Adar Sheni*. When this happens, a “small Purim” is observed on the 14th of the first Adar, and the big Purim celebration takes place on the 14th of the second Adar.