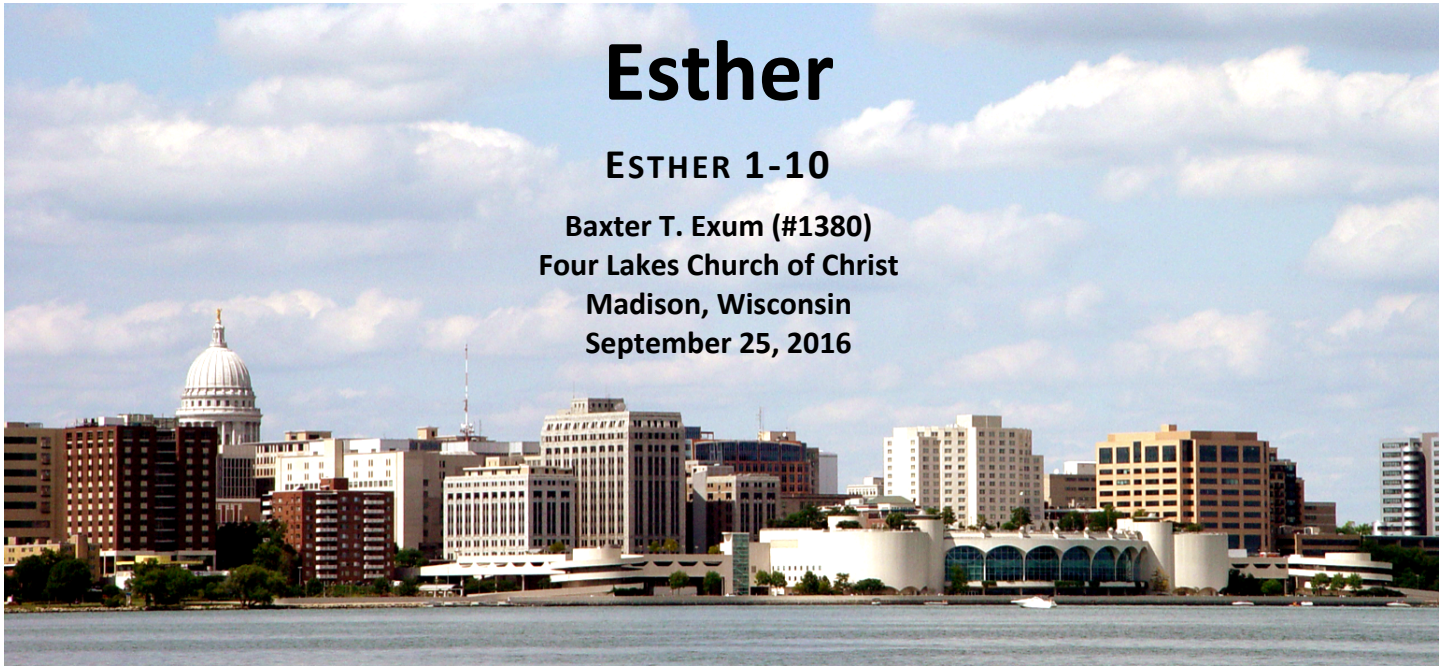


# Esther

## ESTHER 1-10

Baxter T. Exum (#1380)  
Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
September 25, 2016



Earlier this year, one of our members in a meeting with the elders, asked that we take some time to study some of the women in the Bible. We passed out cards asking for favorite, inspiring, or even evil women we could learn from, and over the past several months, we have been looking at these requests.

- We started back on June 5 with a study of LYDIA, a worshiper of God in the Roman colony of Philippi, a seller of purple who was baptized by the apostle Paul and who became a great blessing to God's people.
- We then looked at PRISCILLA and her husband Aquila, a husband and wife team who traveled from one place to another, making tents, serving God, teaching the gospel, and opening their home not only to Paul himself, but also as a place for the early church to worship.
- We then studied HAGAR, Sarah's servant and mother of Ishmael, and we learned from Hagar that God sees what we are going through and that he cares, no matter where we are, no matter how we got there, and no matter how desperate we might be at the time.
- We studied HERODIAS, an evil woman who felt that she was above the law, a woman who heard the truth but held a grudge, even leading directly to the murder of John the Baptist.
- In July, we looked at PHOEBE, a servant of the church just outside the city of Corinth, a sister in Christ who is described as a saint in Romans 16.
- We then looked at EUODIA and SYNTYCHE, two women who were commanded by Paul to get along, and we learned from these two to expect conflict in the church from time to time, but when it happens, we are to work to fix it, even getting help from others if we need it.
- In August, we then took two weeks to look at TAMAR in 2 Samuel 13, and we learned from the attack on Tamar that Amnon her half-brother had a friend who egged him on, the danger of peer pressure. And then we learned something from King David in this incident. He should have done something, but instead, King David did nothing. He should have known what was going on with his own children, and he should have been consistent with his discipline, but he was not.
- We then studied MARY MAGDALENE, with an emphasis on her being the first one to meet the Lord after his resurrection in John 20. She was a persistent follower, a grieving friend, and she was an enthusiastic eyewitness.
- Then, in September, we looked at MARY and ELIZABETH, the Lord's mother and the mother of John the Baptist, and we learned that both women were women of great faith, they believed God's message,

they were filled with great joy, but at the same time, they were humble and managed to encourage each other.

- And then, over the past two weeks we have looked at the life of RUTH. We summarized the four chapters of Ruth as being a chapter of weeping, a chapter of work, a chapter of waiting, and a chapter where we find a wedding. And then last week, we applied the book of Ruth with a reminder that anybody has the ability to step out in faith, we learned something about the providence of God, and we also saw some foreshadowing concerning the future arrival of Jesus as our Redeemer. Just as Boaz redeemed Ruth, so also the Lord has redeemed us, purchasing our freedom on the cross.

This morning, we conclude this series with a lesson on a woman in the Bible who was requested more than any other. And the account of this woman's life is absolutely thrilling. In it, we find suspense, betrayal, and conspiracy. We have a king, a villain, and a great hero (an orphan), who has the courage to act as hundreds upon thousands of lives are on the line. I am referring, of course, to the book of ESTHER (p. 790). By the way, we have a guest with us this morning by the name of Esther! Some might say that this is rather "lucky," but I was raised to believe that there is no such thing as luck! And so we thank God that he has perhaps arranged for Esther to be with us this morning! And we will learn more about the "providential perhaps" in just a moment as we study this woman's life.

There is really no substitute for reading all ten chapters at one time. I would encourage you to do that. We just don't have time to do that publicly as we did with the four chapters in Ruth, so this morning I would like for all of us to have our Bibles open as we give a summary of the book (highlighting and introducing the major characters), and then I'd like to bring out and emphasize what I believe to be the main lesson in this book. And it is a lesson that applies to everybody in this room – male and female, young and old, without regard for education, income, or racial or ethnic or national background. And I say this because the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword (as we read in Hebrews 4:12).

If you already have your Bibles open to the book of Esther, you will notice that the account starts in the days of Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes in ancient history – Xerxes, by the way, is one of those rare characters in world history, who, like myself, has two x's in his name), the king of Persia, and we find here that his kingdom stretches from India to Ethiopia. So the kingdom is huge, a world superpower, and the kingdom is based in Susa (or as this map has it, Shushan), a city located in what is now Iran.

So the question is: How did Esther, a Jewish orphan, end up in the capital city of the Persian Empire in roughly 480 BC? Well, as we just finished studying in the book of Ezekiel in our Wednesday class a few weeks ago, the Southern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BC and the survivors were taken away to Babylon. During their captivity, the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians (we read about this in the book of Daniel with the handwriting on the wall, announcing to the king of Babylon that his nation would fall the next morning). And that is what happened. After a few years, many of the Jews were allowed to go back home to Jerusalem. However, for a number of reasons, many others decided to stay behind. And that seems to be what happens with Esther.

By the way, we have a bas-relief of Xerxes when he was ruling alongside his father. In real life, this carving is just over 8-feet tall. Xerxes' father (Darius) is on the throne, Xerxes is standing behind him – you will notice that their heads are at the same level, indicating that they are both reigning at this time. In the rest of this carving, there is a man on the right who is paying some kind of tribute to King Darius as he and his son Xerxes accept it. And by the way, the man standing behind King Xerxes is most likely Nehemiah. Remember: Nehemiah was the cupbearer, a position of great honor as he was able to listen in on all of the important

meetings. In Nehemiah's hand you will notice a cloth, similar to what a bartender would use, a towel for wiping the king's cup! But it is Xerxes (the man standing behind the throne) who takes over after his father who is mentioned in Esther 1.

Back to Esther 1, then, we find the king has a huge banquet for all of the important people in the kingdom. They come in from all over the world, basically, and the king throws what is basically a huge drunken party, they all have their own personal bartenders provided by the king (in verse 8), and this party goes on for six months straight! In Wisconsin, we refer to it as "Packer Season." But it goes on for six months. We learn that the king's wife, Queen Vashti has a party of her own with the women who were there. And toward the end of this huge party, as he is totally drunk himself, Xerxes summons his wife, and he wants her to parade her beauty in front of all of his drunken guests. What should she wear? Well, the king tells her to wear her crown, and the way I take this is: He wants her to wear her crown, and nothing else. Maybe the women here this morning could try to imagine this: Your husband is drunk, he's having a party with all of his drunk buddies, and he wants you to come and show off to all of these drunken guests. Well, we find in Esther 1 that Queen Vashti refuses, "No, I will not parade myself in front of all of these people!" [paraphrased]. At this point, we can almost hear all of these important and drunk officials, "Oooo, the queen is not listening to you!" So, the king asks this crowd what he should do, and the officials basically say, "You can't let this slide; otherwise, when we get home, our wives will not listen to us, either! So, you need to make an example of her." And that is what happens. Vashti is removed from being queen because she took this stand, and the king makes a proclamation that all women everywhere need to listen to their husbands. This decree goes out in all languages to every corner of the Persian Empire.

That brings us to Chapter 2. In Chapter 2 the king starts looking for a new queen, and he holds what we might describe as something that takes place on television, something like a cross between "The Bachelor," "Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire," and the "Miss Universe" pageant. If we could somehow combine those three shows, we might have some idea of what was going on here. Thousands of young women are brought in from all over the empire (literally, from one end of the earth to the other), they are prepared for several months (they go through the "Extreme Makeover" program), and then they are basically paraded before the king. Well, we find in Chapter 2 a young woman, Esther, an orphan, a Jew, who is being raised by her uncle Mordecai. She is taken in this process, and as we find in Esther 2:17, ***"The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found favor and kindness with him more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti."*** There is then a huge banquet, and we find that in all of this Esther never informed the king of her Jewish background.

In the last few verses of Chapter 2, we find that Mordecai just so happens to be hanging out at the gate to the city one day, when he overhears a plot to kill the king, he makes it known to Esther, she tells the king in Mordecai's name, and the two men who made the plot are hanged. This is then written down in the official court record.

In Chapter 3, we are introduced to the villain in this story, a close advisor to the king, an evil man by the name of Haman. Haman, by the way, is an Agagite. Now, going back many years, you might remember that Agag was the Amalekite king who God commanded Saul to kill. Saul, though, disobeyed, brought the king home as a trophy, and saved the best of the animals to sacrifice. That right there is what cost Saul his kingship. Samuel said as much before hacking King Agag to pieces on the spot. Well, Haman is a descendant of King Agag. He is an Amalekite – we learned about the Amalekites in our class this morning – they were longtime enemies of God's people. Keep this in mind (the story of King Saul and Agag), because it will come up later.

In the course of Haman's work as a leading official, Haman notices that Mordecai would never bow before him. I'm guessing it goes back to this tension between the Israelites and the Amalekites. The Amalekites were the first to harass God's people in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land hundreds of years earlier. But Mordecai would refuse to bow. In his anger, Haman finds out Mordecai is a Jew, he gets mad, and he comes up with a plot. As a high official, he tells the king that there are certain people in the kingdom who don't respect the king's laws, he doesn't tell the king exactly who these people are, but he has the king sign a decree that on a certain day a little less than a year away, all these people were to be killed and that their assets would be seized. The day of their destruction, by the way, was determined by the casting of lots (or as we might say today, by the casting of dice or the flipping of a coin). Keep this in mind, because this idea of casting lots will come up again a little later. This decree to kill all of the Jews on a certain day then goes out to the entire empire.

Well, when Mordecai hears this (at the beginning of Chapter 4), he is torn up, he takes a copy of the decree to Esther, and he basically says, "You need to do something!" Esther, though, hesitates. She knows that if somebody comes to see the king in his inner court without being called for, the king has one rule: That person will be put to death, unless the king holds out the golden scepter. She also knows that the king has not called for her personally for about a month. I'm thinking that as a world ruler, this would seriously cut down on the interruptions. You can risk seeing the king, but his default position is that you will die, unless for some reason he decides to make an exception. Esther, then, is obviously quite hesitant. So, at this point, Mordecai sends a message back to Esther, and really, his reply is tied to the theme of the whole book. Notice please, Esther 4:13-14, ***"Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, 'Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?'"*** Esther then has Mordecai assemble all the Jews and has them fast for three days, at the end of which she will approach the king, and her attitude is (in verse 16), ***"If I perish, I perish."***

In Chapter 5, Esther approaches the king. She is obviously prepared to die, she knows what happened to the last queen (Queen Vashti) but thankfully, the king sees Esther and raises the scepter. Esther comes in, the king wants to know what is wrong, and he promises her anything she wants, up to half the kingdom. Esther's request is that she be allowed to prepare a banquet for the king and for Haman (Haman, of course, being our villain). They have the banquet, the king wants to know what Esther really wants, but she says that her request is that the three of them have another banquet the next day.

Well, at this point, Haman is thrilled – two banquets with the king and queen in two days! So he goes home that night after the first banquet, but on the way out he sees Mordecai, once again, Mordecai does not bow in his presence, and Haman just burns with anger. He complains to his wife, and her advice is: Build a gallows 75 feet high, and in the morning when you see the king, ask to have Mordecai hanged on it. So he built the gallows.

Well, in Chapter 6, we find that as Haman is plotting Mordecai's death (as he is building the gallows), the king (for some strange reason) cannot sleep. So, in the middle of the night, the king has the official court records brought in so he can do some reading. As he is reading, he just so happens to read that account of Mordecai exposing the plot and saving his life several years earlier. He questions his people, "What has been done to honor Mordecai for this?" Nothing.

At that moment (early the next morning), Haman comes in to talk about hanging Mordecai, but before he can open his mouth, the king basically says, "If I want to really honor somebody, what would you suggest I do?" Haman, thinking that this is all about him, goes on and on about letting this person borrow the royal robe and that he should be led on a huge parade through the city and so on. The king then basically says, "Okay, that sounds good. Here is my horse and my robes, I want you to go do this for Mordecai!" Which Haman does.

As soon as he gets back, it's time for the banquet. And that brings us to Chapter 7. Esther 7 is just an awesome chapter in the Bible, so I'd like to ask that we all look at Chapter 7 together. Notice, please, Esther 7,

**<sup>1</sup> Now the king and Haman came to drink wine with Esther the queen. <sup>2</sup> And the king said to Esther on the second day also as they drank their wine at the banquet, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done." <sup>3</sup> Then Queen Esther replied, "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me as my petition, and my people as my request; <sup>4</sup> for we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated. Now if we had only been sold as slaves, men and women, I would have remained silent, for the trouble would not be commensurate with the annoyance to the king." <sup>5</sup> Then King Ahasuerus asked Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who would presume to do thus?" <sup>6</sup> Esther said, "A foe and an enemy is this wicked Haman!" Then Haman became terrified before the king and queen.**

**<sup>7</sup> The king arose in his anger from drinking wine and went into the palace garden; but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm had been determined against him by the king. <sup>8</sup> Now when the king returned from the palace garden into the place where they were drinking wine, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. Then the king said, "Will he even assault the queen with me in the house?" As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face. <sup>9</sup> Then Harbonah, one of the eunuchs who were before the king said, "Behold indeed, the gallows standing at Haman's house fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai who spoke good on behalf of the king!" And the king said, "Hang him on it." <sup>10</sup> So they hanged Haman on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai, and the king's anger subsided.**

In Chapter 8, the king promotes Mordecai by giving him Haman's position, and Esther begs the king to revoke his earlier command concerning the Jews. Unfortunately, decrees from the king in Persia cannot be revoked. So instead, the king issues a new command, giving all Jews living in his kingdom the right to defend themselves using whatever means necessary, even giving them permission to completely destroy their enemies. This decree is then sent out to all corners of the empire.

In Chapter 9, based on this proclamation, the Jewish people completely destroy their enemies, including 500 in the capital city alone, including the ten sons of Haman. But I would make an interesting observation at the end of Esther 9:10. Notice how that verse ends, **"...but they did not lay their hands on the plunder."** Do you remember how Haman was a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites? And do you remember how Saul was removed as king because he disobeyed God by taking some of the plunder from the Amalekites? Hundreds of years later, I believe God's people were honoring what happened there! They destroyed their enemies, but they refused to even touch those items that were left behind, something they learned from King Saul's failure to obey God.

We go on in the rest of Chapter 9, and we find that the Jewish people institute the Feast of Purim to celebrate what happened here. Purim goes back to the word for “lot” or “dice.” If you remember, the original date to destroy the Jews was set based on the casting of lots. The book then concludes in Chapter 10 with Mordecai ending up as second in command of the entire Persian Empire, second only to the king.

With a book this long and a story with so many intricacies, there are many ways we can go with this. For a while, I thought about emphasizing the danger of racial prejudice and hatred. Really, it was this hatred of Haman for Mordecai that caused all of this. I thought about emphasizing the fact that we are not alone in the Christian faith, that like Esther, we owe much of our success to those who raised us, just as she got so much of her strength from Mordecai. We need people in our lives like Mordecai, those who will pray for us, those who will encourage us to do the right thing. There are so many other lessons we could take from this book. But really, there is only one lesson. There is one main overwhelming idea in the book of Esther, and the main point of this book is the importance of acting with courage during those critical moments, the idea that one person can make a difference. The idea that God is working in this world, but he works through his people to do some amazing things. Courage at just the right moment! The importance of working with God! If I could boil it down to one sentence: **GOD IS WORKING IN THIS WORLD, AND HE IS INVITING US TO BE A PART OF IT, JUST AS HE DID WITH ESTHER.** And that takes courage on our part! Very similar to the book of Ruth, Esther is a book about God working in this world, but he is working behind the scenes. There is something unusual about the book of Esther that I haven’t mentioned yet, and that is: God’s name is never mentioned in this book! In fact, as far as I can tell, the book of Esther is the only book of the Bible where God’s name is not mentioned. And yet, it is also a book where God is most obvious!

We see some huge similarities between what happens with Esther and what happened many years earlier with Joseph. In some ways, it’s the same story. Some bad things happen, but the Bible says that ***“God was with Joseph.”*** And in the end, by working together with God, Joseph saves his people from destruction. In fact, somebody has suggested that Joseph is the class lesson and that Esther is the story problem. Joseph is the lecture, and Esther is the quiz. We read the book of Esther, and like the famine in the days of Joseph, the Jews in her time were also facing destruction, and the answer to this challenge is that God was working in this young woman’s life, and Esther (and a number of others) were simply invited to be a part of God’s solution.

And so, although God is never mentioned in this book, in a sense, this book is all about God! We think about the casting of lots that seemed to motivate Haman. What does Solomon say in Proverbs 16:33? ***“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”*** And so, do we see God in the book of Esther? Absolutely, we do! I think back to our lesson last week about the providential ***“perhaps”*** (like we saw in Philemon), those times when we look back on a situation with 20/20 hindsight, and only then do we start to understand that perhaps God was working behind the scenes – not in a miraculous way, but through his providence, through his people. Was it really an accident that Mordecai just happened to overhear the plot against the king’s life? Do we really think that Esther just happened to be the most beautiful girl in the world precisely at this point on world history? Was it just an accident that on the night Haman just happened to build gallows that the king for some reason was not able to sleep, that he just happened to read the court records, that he just happened to open those books to the page where Mordecai is mentioned? Did it just so happen that Mordecai ends up as second in command of this world superpower (exactly as happened with Joseph so many years earlier and almost exactly as happened with Daniel only a hundred years earlier)? No! Looking back on it, we see God almost as the director of an orchestra on a worldwide scale, bringing all of these things together in such a masterful way! God is working in this world, and he has invited us to be a part of it!

And to me, this should cause all of us here today to look at our own lives in a new and fresh way. Why are we living in Madison, Wisconsin? Why are we working where we are? Why are we living where we do? Why do I have the friends that I do? Why are you going to school where you are going to school? Why have our life circumstances brought us together this morning? In the middle of it, we might say, "I have no idea! I don't know why I'm here!" But looking at our lives through Esther, we start to see the big picture, and we start to wonder: What does God want me to do? And we need to be open to the possibility that God has brought us right to this moment ***"for such a time as this."*** Our response to this is to say "Yes" to God, to step forward with great courage to make good decisions, to speak up at the right time. Be open to the possibility that God has put you right where you are to make a difference, an eternal difference.

But what is required is that we step up like Esther did. And isn't that what was read for us in Mark 8 a little earlier this morning? In Mark 8:34-38, Jesus invited us to take up our cross and follow Him. But we are making an exchange, a swap. We are trading this life for the next, we are swapping this world for the world to come. And we make the swap by not being ashamed of the Lord and his words in this adulterous and sinful generation.

The first step is hearing the word of God. We believe that word, and then we obey it. We commit to a lifetime of turning away from sin. We have a change of heart concerning sin. And then we allow ourselves to be baptized, immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. And at that point, the Christian life begins. We are born into God's family. And then it gets interesting – a lifetime of being available, a lifetime of looking for opportunities to work together with God. If you would like to join us on this journey, if you are ready to obey the good news that Jesus came to this earth to live and die, to be buried, and to be brought back from the dead, you can obey that message right now. If you're ready, let me know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

***\*\*NOTE: The PowerPoint that goes with this lesson is somewhat large, but it is important to the story; so, if you would like me to try to send it to you in some way, please use the email below.\*\****

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)