

weeping with her said, If I perish, I perish.  
45. So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

# The Book of Esther: God In Control

**N**ow it came to pass in the third year that Xerxes put on his eunuchs, and eunuchs that were chosen to stand over against the king's house; and the king set upon his royal throne in the royal house, just against the gate of the house.

7. And it came to pass when the king was feasting the queen standing in the court; that she perceived Haman in the night; and the king beheld out to Esther, the eunuchs wept; that was in his mind. So Esther arose from her, and reached the gate of the house.

3: Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom.

4: And Esther answered, If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him.

5: Then the king said, Cause Haman to make haste, that he may do as Esther hath said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared.

6: And the king said unto Esther at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee; and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed.

7: Then answered Esther, and said, My petition is my request:

8: All I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to prosper my request, let the king and Haman come unto the banquet that I shall prepare for them; and I will do tomorrow as the king hath said.

9: They went thither both that day joyful and with a glad heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he stood not

up, nor bowed for him, he was full of indignation against Mordecai.

10: Mordecai also having related him with the king, the king said, and called for Haman, and said unto him, What is thy petition? and what is thy request? and he shall be granted thee; and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed.

11: Then said the king unto Haman, What is thy petition, and the pleasure of thy children; and I will do it. Then said Haman unto the king, Let the king and Haman come to the banquet and supper that I have prepared for myself, and for my seven sons, and for the king.

12: Haman said moreover, Yea, Esther the queen did for me thus: because she will not come into the banquet that the king hath prepared for herself; and by so much am I divided with her also with the king.

13: Yet all this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai's headless sitting in the king's gate.

14: Then said Zeresh his wife and all his friends unto him, Let a gallows be made of fifty cubits high, and tomorrow speak thou unto the king that Mordecai may be hanged thereon: then go thou in merrily with the king unto the banquet. And the thing pleased Haman; and he caused the gallows to be made.

## CHAPTER 6

**O**n that night could not the king sleep, and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king.

2: And it was found written, that Mordecai had said of Bigtham and Teresh, two of the king's chamberlains, the keepers of the door, who sought to lay hands on the king Achashverus.

3: And the king said, What have I said? and what have I done? Mordecai he did? Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, They would lay hands on him.

4: And the king said, What is in the court? Then Haman, who came into the inward court of the king's palace; to speak unto the king to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him.

# **THE BOOK OF ESTHER: GOD IN CONTROL**

**By B. A. Ramsbottom**

2003

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## Note by Author

Encouraged by the kind welcome given to my little book *The King Who Would Not Listen*, I follow with another little book in similar vein. Again, this book originated as a series of talks to my Bible class (young people in their teens and early twenties).

The purpose of *The Book of Esther - God in Control* is to be of spiritual help to young people. However, I would emphasise that, though primarily intended for young people, I trust once again that the book will be profitable to older ones also.

A few helpful thoughts I have repeated are from *Unspoken Lessons about the Unseen God* by Derek Prime.

B. A. Ramsbottom  
September 2003

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## A REMARKABLE BOOK

The Book of Esther is a most remarkable and interesting book. *The name of God* is never mentioned - *the hand of God* is clearly seen on every page.

*Why should this be?*

Various suggestions have been made why God's name is not mentioned. Some have thought it was because God was displeased with His ancient people. Some have suggested a fear of Persian censorship. It has even been suggested that the name of God is hidden - in code, or an anagram, or an acrostic. One thing we do know: the Book of Esther is part of God's inspired, infallible Word. Someone has wisely said, "When God seems to be most absent, He is most present."

The whole story takes place in the 5th century B.C. in the mighty Persian Empire. This was the greatest empire before the Romans, and lasted for two centuries. Persia conquered Babylon in 539 B.C.

Esther, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah all fit into this period. What happened in the Book of Esther took place between the return to Jerusalem of Zerubbabel and the return of Ezra nearly eighty years later.

The Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther is the Xerxes of secular history and a lot is known about him outside Scripture. We are right in the midst of ancient history here.

At this time the Persians ruled Palestine. They were the most friendly of all the conquerors of the Jews.

But girls and boys may ask the question: WHAT HAS ALL THIS TO DO WITH US? What do these ancient happenings mean for us? What have we got to do with Ahasuerus, and Esther, and Haman, and Mordecai?

We are living in the midst of an ungodly culture, just like the Jews then. The world does not think like us, act like us, behave like us, even understand us. But we find people like Esther and Mordecai doing what was right, whatever the cost. And God was with them. And God honoured them. This is an example for us - and an encouragement!

Above all, in the Book of Esther, we see *God in control* - not Satan, not wicked men. It is still the same today. God is almighty. God reigns. And God makes all things work together for His people's good.

So perhaps the greatest lesson in the Book of Esther is *God's Providence*. What do we mean by providence? God performing in time what He has purposed eternally. Nothing takes place by chance, or luck, or accident. God orders everything - *everything*. Yet in no way is He the author of sin.

So the Book of Esther has many (what people would call) "contingencies." Little things, but so much depended on them! A small happening altering everything that was taking place.

Do you know the verse?

"His providence unfolds the book,  
And makes His counsels shine:  
Each opening leaf, and every stroke,  
Fulfils some deep design."

It is a dark, evil world in which we live. What of the children growing up in this wicked world? What of you young people with all your problems, difficulties and temptations? The God of the Book of Esther still lives and reigns. If we are under His shadow, the shadow of His divine providence, then we are safe. Come what may, all must be well.

Let us see, then, what lessons we can learn from this interesting book - "GOD IN CONTROL."

## A SHOCK AT THE FEAST

*Please read chapter 1.*

You have read about things long ago in the far off Persian Empire. It all seems to be nothing to do with religion, nothing to do with spiritual things, nothing to do with us today. But it is. God is *there* - and He is at work.

This chapter gives the background to it all. We meet Ahasuerus, a mighty king. Secular history identifies him: King Xerxes I, and tells us he reigned from 486 B.C. to 465 B.C. There was a famous ancient historian, Herodotus, who tells us a lot about him. He was the son of Darius and not as strong a king as he was. Yet he was tall and handsome, and a good soldier in the battlefield. He had just won battles against the Egyptians and the Greeks.

Immediately we see his greatness. What a vast empire was his! (verse 1). And what a display of magnificence and extravagance!

The city Shushan (otherwise known as “Susa”) was surrounded by mountains and streams. Here the king had his winter house. Where was it? About 150 miles from Babylon - in modern Iran - near the border of Iraq.

### ARCHAEOLOGY

I do not profess to know much about archaeology; but excavations in 1852 and again in 1884 have discovered an area of 5000 acres, and given an interesting background and confirmation to this chapter.

Just a word in passing about Bible archaeology. We should never talk about archaeology “proving the Bible to be true,” or claims like that. The Bible *is* true. And what do we say if archaeologists *think* their claims contradict the Bible?

But there have been many times when finds have been wonderfully

confirming. “The stones cry out!” There have been times when people have been silent before the assaults of modern unbelief, till “the stones have cried out,” and in a moment some discovery has completely overturned the arguments of the ungodly.

Quite popular years ago were the writings of Sir Leonard Woolley, on Ur of the Chaldees; J.L. Porter, on “The Giant Cities of Bashan”; A.H. Layard and P.E. Botta, on Nineveh. If I remember right, it was claimed that the great cities of Bashan had never existed; then Porter discovered them.

So much in passing on “Bible archaeology.” But it is interesting that the city “once noted for fruit and flowers,” Shushan (Susa), has been found.

What do we say about the lavish banquets; the enormous number of guests; the length of time they continued; the display of wealth; the generosity (verses 3 to 9)? There must have been gasps of astonishment: “Have you ever seen anything like it?” *But where was God in it all?* We think of Him who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

But whatever can all this have to do with the things of God and His people (and us)? Well, really a miracle was about to take place. Down the ages Satan has always sought to destroy the people of God. We think of Pharaoh in Egypt, and a multitude of attempts right down to modern times. Now there was going to be a plot to destroy all the Jews throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus. But (impossible thing!) when this took place, a godly Jewess would be sitting on the throne, Ahasuerus’ queen!

But how could it all take place? “God’s providence unfolds the book.” The climax of all the feasting and revelling was to be the appearance of the most beautiful Queen Vashti to display her beauty. She refused (verses 10 to 12). The whole assembly was shocked. And so as a result Queen Vashti was deposed. Her place would be taken by Esther.

Let us be clear. The harsh rejection of Vashti in no way can be justified - and yet in God’s mysterious providence, it was part of God’s plan.

“Here eternal wisdom shines,  
For Satan works what God designs.”

We think of Joseph’s cruel treatment by his brethren: “Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good.” We think of how wickedly John Bunyan was imprisoned, yet what blessings there have been from his *Pilgrim’s Progress*, written in prison. Above all, we think of the death of Christ: “Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.”

Before leaving the chapter, there are two important lessons we can learn:

1. *The danger of acting when “off balance.”*

It seems clear (verse 10) that Ahasuerus acted under the influence of strong drink, and this caused him, foolishly, to want to display his queen’s beauty, and then rashly to expel her from the throne. “Shun strong drink as you would the devil,” were almost the last words of William Gadsby.

Never act rashly or make important decisions when “off balance.” It probably will *not* be strong drink. But we can be intoxicated in other ways! Many have made rash decisions when angry - or jealous - or overwhelmed with sorrow - or excited - and lived to regret it.

I knew a girl who for some silly reason became cross with her boy friend, and thought she would teach him a lesson. She posted her engagement ring back to him. Next day, and for days afterwards, she looked, and waited for him to bring it back. She never saw him again to her dying day. O the bitterness of heart she endured!

2. *The power of example.*

The wise men deplored what Queen Vashti had done, disobeying her husband (verses 17, 18) because they said, “What a dreadful example! other women will be encouraged to disobey and despise their husbands!” Now though Ahasuerus’ harsh treatment of Vashti cannot be justified, yet the wise men had laid hold on a vital principle: *the tremendous influence of*

*example.* What influence can husbands have on their wives and families; mothers on their children; pastors on their congregations! How easily influenced we are, and what an influence we can have, for good and evil! John Newton, though he became an atheist and a blasphemer, never forgot his mother's influence. Philip Doddridge never forgot his mother showing him the Bible pictures on the Dutch tiles by the fireplace, and telling him the stories. You girls, what an influence you may have as mothers!

Above all, we think of the sacred influence of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

## THE NEW QUEEN – GOD’S CHOICE

*Please read chapter 2.*

It would appear that about four years passed between chapters 1 and 2. Secular historians tell us that this had been a difficult time for Ahasuerus (Xerxes). There had been the disastrous Greek war and the defeat at the famous Battle of Salamis.

Now the king needs another bride, and in this chapter we have all the details of how she was to be chosen. In present day language, there was to be “a beauty competition.” None of it is very salutary - in fact, very sordid. And yet over and beyond it all, Almighty God was at work. There was going to be a vicious attack to destroy God’s people in exile, the Jews. But this did not take God by surprise. He was already preparing for it.

So the one who was to be chosen was a godly Jewish girl, Esther, who would be willing to risk her life for the sake of God’s people. We cannot help thinking of Joseph in Egypt - the strange circumstances which placed him in a position of authority just when God’s people needed him. “He sent a man before them, even Joseph.”

### WHO WAS ESTHER?

We are told who Esther was. She was an orphan girl and had been brought up by a godly cousin named Mordecai. It seems clear Mordecai was a much older person, and she revered him as her own father.

But what are we to say about Esther entering this competition? How does this fit in with grace and godliness? After all, Vashti, the lawful queen, had been set aside - and it seems it was because she acted in a becoming way.

This is not an easy question. We have to say straight away that it is a mystery - how God could have appointed this.

A few things can be said, though.

1. This is certainly *not* a pattern, and certainly should not be imitated

by girls today. God’s teaching concerning marriage is clear, and a girl who fears the Lord is not to marry an ungodly boy, let alone one who has divorced his wife.

2. It has to be realised that polygamy, having more than one wife, was permitted at this time, even among God’s people. (But there are so many strange things about polygamy in the Old Testament, aren’t there?)

3. It appears that Esther was passive in it all. She did not apply. In that despotic regime (compare that of Saddam Hussein recently!), was it possible for her to refuse? Was she forced into it?

4. Over and above it all, we can see God working out His purpose. He uses evil things, without ever being the author of them.

“Great is the mystery, truly great,  
That hell’s designs should hell defeat;  
But here eternal wisdom shines,  
For Satan works what God designs.”

So, we meet Esther, and at once find out what an attractive person she was. She excelled in beauty, but, as the book unfolds, we see she excelled in grace. Her obedience to her foster-father Mordecai is very noticeable. Verse 10: she told no one that she was a Jewess “for Mordecai had charged her that she should not show it.” Verse 20 (after she was chosen and honoured): “Esther did the commandment of Mordecai, *like as when she was brought up with him.*” A most beautiful display of humility and loyalty!

And ever afterwards she loved and honoured Mordecai, and *never forgot him*. Sadly, we so often read of humble people, who attain to wealth and eminence, no longer wanting to be associated with their old friends, or even their own family. Was there not a wonderfully popular young politician, who devoted his life for the good of the poor and needy, and they loved him in return. But when he became a famous man, he did not want to have anything to do with his former friends. He despised them. He lived in luxury. I myself witnessed a proud clergyman who would not even acknowledge his poor, aged father in the street.

So Esther was chosen to be queen. Sad it is that the choice was made on one ground - beauty. The wise man writes: “Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.”

Remarkably, before the competition took place, Esther was specially helped, more than all the others, by Hegai, the royal official who was in charge. “She obtained kindness of him ... and he preferred her and her maids unto the best place of the house of the women” (verse 9). We wonder why?

And why should the king love her more than all the others, dozens of them? “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will.”

Just a word on this interesting scripture. It refers to skill in irrigation in eastern countries. A piece of ground would be watered by a stream; but then, by skilfully damming its course, it would be diverted to another piece; and then to a third. A skilled farmer could “turn it whithersoever he will.” So the Lord with the mightiest of men. So the Lord with Ahasuerus.

Thus the Lord had forestalled all the plans of Satan and the enemies of the people of God. *God in control!*

\* \* \*

The last three verses (21-23) introduce a completely different scene - a happening, again in the providence of God, which later was to have most momentous consequences.

Mordecai “sat in the king’s gate.” Does this mean he had some special office? Had Esther arranged for his appointment after becoming queen? We do not know.

Anyway, there was a terrible plot to murder the king; two of his own immediate servants, men named Bigthan and Teresh, were involved. And Mordecai heard all about it - and so immediately let Esther know. Esther was able to inform the king, and the two culprits were put to death. A remarkable escape!

1 But how was Mordecai rewarded? It seems he was completely ignored, not even thanked. It must have been a disappointment for him, a sad day.

Some of you will, perhaps, at times know something similar. You help someone. They forget you. You make some sacrifice. It is not even mentioned. Most of us, at some time or other, have had some such experience. And it is hurtful.

But Mordecai *was* remembered later - and *just at the right time*. The very moment he *was* remembered marked the turning point in the amazing story of the Book of Esther. And some of you *will* be remembered - at the right time. What you have done will be recalled.

I have thought of an interesting story, though not an exact illustration. A godly man was working as a joiner and carpenter, when one day a boy arrived as an apprentice at the works. He found things so hard; the things he had to do he could hardly manage. So the godly carpenter spoke kindly to him, and day by day helped him, showing him what he ought to do and how to do it.

Perhaps it was fifty years later. It was the Lord Mayor’s banquet in Coventry, and the one-time young apprentice was now the Lord Mayor. Someone happened to mention his old helper, now a very aged man. “He can’t still be alive, can he?” asked the Lord Mayor. “*He’s a good man.*”

And so the next week, replete with chains of office and in the mayoral Rolls Royce, the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress arrived at the old man’s little home, and talked about old times. He had *never* forgotten the kindness he received. What a witness to the power of Christian example!

## PUR – THE LOT

*Please read chapter 3.*

There are four important characters in the Book of Esther. So far we have only met three: Ahasuerus - Esther - Mordecai. Now we are introduced to the fourth - Haman, and we find him a most unpleasant character.

Haman was descended from Amalek, and we hear of nothing good in Scripture concerning the Amalekites. The Lord has declared “war with Amalek from generation to generation.” (Exodus 17. 16). A strong statement!

It appears that King Ahasuerus took a special liking to Haman, and made him his “favourite.” Throughout history, many kings have had these favourites and it has never done any good. No doubt you have heard of James I and his favourite, the Duke of Buckingham, and all the trouble and discontent. To all intents and purposes Haman became the prime minister.

The one thing that marked this Haman was pride. He was completely swallowed up with it. Everyone must bow down to him. But there was one man who did not, would not. “But Mordecai ...” (verse 2). And this inflamed Haman.

I remember A.W. Light giving a lecture on the “The Book of Esther” when he spoke of “that good old Protestant Mordecai”! Mordecai wished to walk in the fear of the Lord. We are commanded to “be in the fear of the Lord all the day long.” This will make us act differently from the world. There will be certain things we cannot do. We shall not say, “It doesn’t matter.” And right behaviour will sometimes cause difficulties for us. It was not awkwardness with Mordecai. To Mordecai, bowing down to Haman was idolatry, and as a godly Israelite he would not be an idolater.

Haman was so infuriated that he determined to get rid of Mordecai, and he would stop at nothing. It has been said: “God’s people cannot expect a fair deal from the world.”

We find that the king’s servants were very sympathetic to Haman. Well they might! They wanted to be *in* with him. Some people are always “looking over their shoulders.” They want to see which way the wind is blowing. They don’t want to be out of favour. So “they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai’s matters would stand” (verse 4) - i.e. would they be tolerated. “For he had told them that he was a Jew.” There always has been enmity against God’s people, and a desire to oppose them.

No doubt some of you at times will be in Mordecai’s position. Will you stand or not? And what about those who whisper about what you are doing? “Report, say they, and we will report it.” (Never be that whisperer yourself!)

*The one thing Mordecai had on his side was his God.* He was “under the shadow of the Almighty.” And the Lord was with him to watch over him, to protect him, and to make all things work for his good.

But don’t be like Haman! Never be like Haman! How childish his behaviour! What peevishness! He seemed to have *everything*, but such a little thing threw him, prostrated him - his pride grieved because one Jew would not bow down to him.

We are reminded again that happiness does not rest in worldly possessions. Many have had all the world can give, but one little thing has robbed them of all their happiness. Wasn’t it John D. Rockefeller, the wealthiest man in the world, who said he would give it all in exchange for one good night’s sleep? “Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God.” (I have found this a suitable wedding text.)

But Satan was behind it all - his enmity against the people of God. This desire to wipe out all God’s people. “Then was Haman full of wrath. And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had shewed him the people of Mordecai; wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews” (verses 5, 6).

### ANTI-SEMITISM

This was one of the many displays there have been of anti-semitism. There have been many in history, right up to Hitler and the holocaust. But God's people are indestructible. The agnostic Frederick the Great on one occasion demanded that one of his God-fearing generals should give him a proof of the existence of God in one word. The answer was: "THE JEW." How amazing that, after centuries of bitter persecution, God's ancient people still retain their natural identity!

### PUR

But again we see that the hearts of all men are in the Lord's hands. We see utter foolishness in this great man Haman. He wanted to find out some "lucky day" which would be the best to exterminate the Jews. So he cast lots ("pur" being the Hebrew word for "the lot"): "They cast Pur, that is, the lot." It was now the month Nisan and the lot fell that they should act in the month Adar - in simple language, not till eleven months ahead. So the Lord's people had a breathing space. The truth of God's Word was verified. "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord."

### CASTING LOTS

In passing, what are we to say of "the casting of lots"? In Scripture we do have occasions when the lot was cast to make an important decision (Joshua 18. 10; Acts 1. 26) but these were rare occasions, occasions of great importance, and all was ordered most solemnly and by prayer. Rash and foolish "casting of lots" is certainly not God-honouring. Among famous people, it is well-known that John Wesley was in the habit of casting lots. He actually had a special apparatus which he carried about with him. For instance, when George Whitefield preached his famous sermon on election, John Wesley cast lots whether he should oppose him or not. The lot said, "Yes." Much better if Wesley had searched the Scriptures to see what they teach on the doctrine of election.

So ungodly Haman made his request to the king, not forgetting of course to malign the Jews and speak unfavourably of them (verse 8). “It is not for the king’s profit to suffer them.”

Foolishly the king gave him his authority to do all that he desired on the day appointed. He even sealed the edict with the king’s ring. He even had notification of this sent out throughout his vast dominion (verses 10-14).

How unwise was all this of the king! There is a word which says: “He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him” (Prov. 18. 13). There are usually two sides to a question. We need to avoid acting hastily. Perhaps there is something that we do not know. We believe that much trouble has been caused in the church of God through even godly people acting hastily and unadvisedly on hearing some report - perhaps only part of the truth.

Verse 15: “The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed.” Well it might be so - both the godly Jews and also those who lived with them and who knew what a law-abiding people they were!

In this sad day girls and boys often find things that make them perplexed. Even the great Apostle Paul exclaimed, “We are perplexed.” Mercifully he could add, “But not in despair.”

There are no perplexities with God. He is never perplexed. So the last verse of Esther chapter 3 is not the end of the story. A few chapters later we read: “And the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad.”

“Still pray, for God will all explain,  
Nor shalt thou seek His face in vain.”

\* \* \*

As “the casting of lots” - Pur, giving the name to the Feast of Purim - is so important in the Book of Esther, we add an interesting and remarkable story.

In Germany in the late 17th century, a godly young man was unjustly accused of murder. So great was the judge’s perplexity that the case was

to be publicly decided by the casting of lots. The other accused (the real murderer) would cast the two dice; then the poor accused innocent. The one with the highest score would be declared innocent, and set free; the other put to death.

“Black Rudolf,” the murderer, cast first. The dice showed two sixes - six on one, six on the other. It was impossible to throw a higher score. Prayerfully and submissively putting himself into the hands of his God, godly Henry threw the dice. There was a gasp of amazement from the watching crowd. One of the dice showed six, the other had split when striking the ground, and revealed an extra dot (or eye) - seven altogether.

Thus the Lord brought judgment to the light.

(From *The Wonderful Providence of God*, by John van Zweden, quoted *Friendly Companion* 1987, pp. 47-51.)