



cell outlines | week three

These Cell Outlines are written by ALOVE UK. They are available each week from our web site. For more information and other cell resources, visit [www.salvationarmy.org.uk/alove/resources](http://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/alove/resources)

## INTRODUCING ESTHER

This cell group aims to introduce the book and story of Esther to the group before you begin the five summer school cell outlines over the next few weeks. There is a lot of information presented in this factfile, interspersed with questions for group discussion.

### You Will Need:

- Bibles
- Map of the Persian Empire from Bible times and modern times
- Photocopies of this factfile for each group member

### 1. ESTHER FACTS

**The Book:** You will find the book of Esther in the middle of the Old Testament... just after the book of Nehemiah but before Job! There are only 10 short chapters in this amazing story.

Find Esther in your Bibles and flick through the pages. Discuss what you already know about Esther and her remarkable story. Those of you that have study Bibles may find additional information that you can share with the group.

**Setting:** The story is set in the Persian Empire, and most of the action takes place in the King's palace in Susa, the Persian capital. The vast expanse of the Persian Empire covered from modern-day Pakistan in the east to modern-day Turkey in the west. Whoever ruled this empire was a very rich and powerful king indeed!

Look at the map of the Persian Empire both from the time of Esther and how it looks today.



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**Date Written:** Approximately 483–471 BC (before Christ). Esther became queen in 479BC.

**Author:** No one knows for sure. Some have guessed that Mordecai himself wrote it... others suggest maybe Nehemiah or Ezra.

**Key People:** Esther, Mordecai, King Xerxes I, Haman

**Purpose:** To demonstrate God's sovereignty and his loving care for his people.

**Key Verse:** Esther 4:14

Look up this verse together and read it out in all the different translations you have available.

*'For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?' (NIV)*

*'Don't think that just because you live in the King's house you're the one Jew who will get out of this alive. If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this.'* (The Message)

- What do you think this verse means?
- Why is this the key verse in the book / story of Esther?
- Do you know how Esther responded to this challenge?

**Special Features:** Esther is only one of two books named after women (the other is Ruth). The book is unusual because God is not specifically mentioned anywhere in the story. However, God's presence is clear throughout the book.

## 2. CHARACTERS IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER



### King Xerxes

Look up Esther 1:1-3

The first person we meet in the book of Esther is King Xerxes. In some translations you will see him called King Ahasuerus.

He was incredibly rich and proud and was the most powerful man on earth at the time. When Esther's story begins he was in his third year as King and he reigned for 21 years.



### Queen Vashti

Look up Esther 1:9-12

The second significant person in the story is his queen, and we meet her only a few verses later. We don't know much about Vashti but she appears to be a strong-minded, independent-thinking woman. It was her actions that begin the conflict in this story.

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**Haman**

Look up Esther 3:1-2

Haman is the villain of the story! He is a wealthy and influential adviser to the King... you could say he was the King's right-hand man, number two in the kingdom. Haman hated all Jews, was deceitful and proud, and would stop at nothing for celebrity and power.

**Mordecai**

Look up Esther 2:5-6

Mordecai was a godly man living in Persia. Mordecai was a descendant of the Jews who had been forced into exile\* by the fall of Jerusalem about one hundred years before. It was not easy living as a Jew in these hostile surroundings... in fact it could be downright dangerous as there were many people who didn't like the Jews in their country. Mordecai took his much younger cousin, Esther, an orphan, to be his daughter and brought her up in the faith. Mordecai worked at the palace.

\*Exile: forced to leave one's native country

**Esther**

Look up Esther 2:7

Esther was the beautiful adopted daughter of Mordecai. The name Esther means 'star' and she really is the star of this story. God used this forgotten, lowly orphan to save the nation of the Jews. Esther is described as a beautiful woman on the outside, but in the inside too she discovered the secret of spiritual courage and inner beauty.

**Other characters**

**Bigthan and Teresh:** Royal officials who plan an assassination attempt on King Xerxes. (Esther 2: 21)

**Zeresh:** Haman's wife, who persuades him to build a huge gallows for Mordecai. (Esther 5: 10,14)

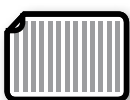
**Hegai:** The chief eunuch\* in charge of the women in the harem\*\* and who first spots Esther's royal potential. (Esther 2:3,8)

\*Eunuch: Some advisers and government officials were castrated in order to prevent them having children and then rebelling against the King to form their own kingdom. A castrated official was called a eunuch and was often placed in charge of the king's harem.

\*\*Harem: Persian kings collected not only vast amounts of jewellery but also great numbers of women. These young virgins were taken from their homes and required to live in a separate building near the palace, called a harem. Their sole purpose was to serve the king and await his call for sexual pleasure. They rarely saw the king, however, and their lives were restricted and boring.

- As you reflect on the different characters in this story have you already decided who you admire / dislike?

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- Can you see any of your own character traits reflected in these people? How does that challenge you?
- Think of people who have put their own or other people's freedom (or even their lives) at risk by taking a stand on a matter of importance. What is your opinion of this action?

### 3. THE STORY

Read through the following overview of the story together. Each group member could read a paragraph... or you could even try acting it out as you read!

#### **Royal Banquet Lasts Six Months! (Esther 1: 1-9)**

The story begins with a royal banquet in the palace at Susa. King Xerxes is throwing a humungous party for all the important people in his land to show off his wealth, power and status. What a party! Wine is flowing freely and the guests are treated to an extraordinary display of riches such as had never been seen before. Part of the reason for this banquet was to plan a battle strategy for the King's invasion of Greece which was soon to begin.

#### **Queen Vashti Ousted from Palace (Esther 1: 9-21)**

Perhaps King Xerxes had run out of wealth to display or had drunk too much wine; whatever the reason, he demanded that Queen Vashti come and parade before his guests at his lavish banquet wearing her royal crown. (Some writers think this was all she was supposed to wear!) King Xerxes wanted to display Vashti as he had displayed his other items of wealth, but Vashti refused to be treated in such a demeaning way and would not come! Frantic conversations took place between the King and his advisers as they tried to save face for the King. The outcome was that Vashti was to be deposed and another queen sought to take her place.

#### **Let Battle Commence**

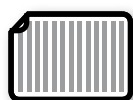
It doesn't say in the text, but it was at this time (the beginning of chapter two) that King Xerxes went off to wage war against Greece. He lost! As he returned home defeated and depressed it would seem he began to miss his queen. It was four years since he had done away with Vashti. The search for a new queen had begun.

#### **Beauty Contest (Esther 2: 1-4)**

The call went out for all young beautiful girls to come to the palace in a sort of bizarre beauty pageant! Many of these girls would have been forcefully taken from their families. Once in the King's harem they were to undergo a whole year of beauty treatments to maximise their potential. Then, one by one, they would be bought before the King for him to choose his new queen. If a girl was rejected by the King, she would remain in the harem, just one of the many girls the King had seen once and forgotten. Imagine the competition – back-biting, in-fighting, jealousy and rivalry – that would have been going on in this harem, as each girl scabbled to get herself noticed by the King and become his Queen.

#### **Introducing Moredecai and Esther (Esther 2: 5-14)**

The next few verses introduce Mordecai and Esther. We are told immediately that they are both exiled





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Jews living in Susa and that Mordecai had bought Esther up when her parents died. Esther is described as being very beautiful and so was one of the many girls taken to the royal palace. Here she meets Hegai, who developed a soft spot for Esther and picked her out for special treatment. Esther displayed grace, dignity and self-restraint in this hothouse of malicious behaviour. Three times we are told that 'she found favour' by others. Oh yeah – and no one in the palace knew Esther was a Jew as Mordecai had advised her not to reveal her background.

### **New Queen Revealed! (Esther 2: 15-18)**

The time came for Esther to go before the King. She prepared herself using only the beauty treatments and clothes that Hegai advised, and she won the favour and approval of the King. The new Queen had been found, and once again the country partied!

### **Conspiracy Foiled (Esther 2: 19-23)**

The story takes a slight detour here in order to tell us about a plot on the King's life. The conspirators, aptly named Bigthan and Teresh, were overheard discussing their plot by Mordecai who informed Esther, who in turn warned the King. These two baddies were discovered and hanged and the whole sordid event was written in the King's records. Only three verses at the end of chapter two describe this remarkable happening, but remember it, because later on in the story it provides the dramatic turning point for one of the main characters and one of the key moments where we see God at work.

### **Kneel Before Haman? (Esther 3: 1-6)**

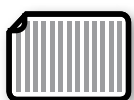
It strikes us as odd that the next sentence after Mordecai's clever discovery above is that the King honoured, not Mordecai, but Haman! This conceited, dangerous man became more and more powerful; all the palace officials were expected to bow before him when he came by. Mordecai blatantly refused to honour Haman in this way... and this drove Haman wild! Mordecai, as a Jew, would not bow down before anyone other than God. And how Haman hated Mordecai, and all the Jews, with an obsessive passion! He wanted Mordecai dead and the Jews wiped off the face of the earth.

### **History Lesson**

It seems extreme to want to obliterate the whole race of the Jews because of one man's refusal to bow down, but if we look deeper into the Bible we discover that these guys had history! Haman came from a nation who for generations had hated the Jews... the Agagites. (This came from the humiliating defeat of King Agag of the Amalakitites that you can read in 1 Samuel 15.) The Jews never let the Agagites forget their victory! Haman would have been bought up with racial prejudice that fuelled his anger towards Mordecai and the Jewish race.

### **Plot to Kill The Jews (Esther 3:7 to 4:3)**

Haman couldn't let his obsession rest and came up with a plan to get rid of the Jews. He deceived the King into believing that the Jews were a threat to him and his kingdom and persuaded the King to sign an edict\* ordering that on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month all Jews in the land, young and old, men, women and children, would be annihilated. All across the empire the sound of weeping, wailing, shouting and anger was heard as the Jews confronted the horror of what was to befall them in less than a year's time. Mordecai joins in the mourning by tearing his clothes in distress and wailing loudly and bitterly.





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### For Such a Time as This (Esther 4: 4-14)

When Esther heard that Mordecai was in distress she quickly dispatched a messenger to find out what was wrong. Mordecai explained to Esther exactly what was happening and pleaded with her to approach the King and beg for mercy for her people. (Remember, no one knew the Queen was a Jew.) However, Esther reminded Mordecai that no person, not even the Queen, was allowed to go into the King's presence unless he/she had been specifically summoned by the King himself. To do so meant almost certain death. The person's life would only be saved if the King extended his golden sceptre towards that person. Esther hadn't been called to see the King in over 30 days... would she be prepared to risk her life to try to save the Jewish people?

It is here that Mordecai presents Esther with her greatest challenge and the most well-known verse of the whole story (4: 14). Paraphrased, Mordecai's words go something like this: 'Esther, don't think that just because you are the Queen living in the King's house that you will be the only Jew to escape annihilation. If you do nothing you will certainly die along with the rest of us, even if God raises up help from another source. But don't you think this is all part of God's plan, that he has put you in this position for such a time as this? You are in the right place at the right time to make a difference. You have to do something!'

### Courageous Young Queen Wins Through! (Esther 4:15 to 5:8)

So Esther prepares to go to the King on behalf of her people, the Jews. She asks all the Jews to pray and fast for her for three days and then she will make her entrance. 'And,' she says, 'if I die, I die.' On the third day Esther got dressed in all her royal finery. She approached the King with fear and trembling, willing him to extend the sceptre. Seconds must have felt like hours as the King turned and looked to see who had dared to enter his royal court without permission. But who he saw pleased him, he lifted the golden sceptre and asked Esther to come to him and present her request. Rather than just blurt out the problem, the Queen invited the King and his second-in-command, Haman, to a personal banquet in her own royal rooms. At the end of this banquet the King again urged Esther to ask him what she wanted, but Esther simply invited them back the next night for more food!

### Seventy-Five Feet High Gallows (Esther 5: 9-14)

Haman of course is beside himself with glee as he tells everyone that he has been personally invited to tea with the King and Queen! Only one thing was spoiling his happiness – Mordecai! Haman's wife Zeresh suggested that Haman build gallows 75 feet high and ask the King in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it!

### The King Has a Sleepless Night (Esther 6: 12-14)

That very night, the King could not sleep. He asked one of his servants to read from the royal records, perhaps in the hope that it would bore him to sleep! The servant turned randomly to a page in the records and began to read. He told of how, several months ago, Mordecai had saved the King's life by uncovering the assassination plot against him. King Xerxes sat up in bed. 'What had been done to honour this man who saved my life?' On discovering that nothing had been done he wanted to make plans immediately. He sent for the first adviser that could be found in the palace... and guess who it was?! Haman... waiting for the first opportunity to ask the King to order Mordecai's death. Haman entered the King's room. 'What should be done for the man the King wishes to honour?' Xerxes asked

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Haman. Haman's greedy mind worked overtime – who else would the King wish to honour but his second-in-command?! Haman described an elaborate event which included the honoured man, wearing the King's own robe, riding the King's own horse, being led throughout the streets of the city, with an attendant proclaiming: 'This is what is done for the man the King wishes to honour!' 'Great idea,' said the King. 'Go and do all you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew!'

### Queen Esther Saves The Day! (Esther 7: 1-10)

The Queen's banquet went well; even Haman enjoyed himself after his humiliation of parading Mordecai through the streets on the King's horse! At the end of the banquet, when the King asked again what it was his Queen wanted from him, Esther begged him to spare her life and the lives of her people. The King didn't understand. Esther explained that someone had issued an order that she and her race would be destroyed. The King was furious; he demanded to know who had ordered such a thing. The Queen turned and pointed to Haman... who had gone quite pale and faint! The King stormed out of the room, such was his rage, and Haman turned to the Queen to beg for mercy. As he did so he fell on to the Queen where she was sitting. At that very moment the King came back in. His rage exploded. 'Now are you also trying to molest the Queen whilst my back is turned?' As soon as these words left the King's mouth, attendants covered Haman's face, signalling that he was a condemned man. He was led away to be hanged on the very gallows he had himself prepared for Mordecai. That was the end of Haman!

### A New Edict (Esther 8: 1-17)

Mordecai was promoted in Haman's position and he and Esther worked frantically to come up with a plan to save the Jews from annihilation. An edict written by the King could not be reversed, but they had to come up with something. With the King's permission a new edict was issued giving the Jews permission to fight back on the day they were to be annihilated. However, this was to be only in self-defence; under no circumstances were they to take any plunder from their enemies. Messengers were sent out to every province to spread the word and to urge the Jews to be ready.

### The Jews Fight Back (Esther 9: 1-16)

So on the thirteenth and fourteenth day of the twelfth month the Jews assembled in their cities to attack those seeking their destruction. Many men were killed and much blood was shed. But the Jews were victorious. Their race was not wiped out.

### Let The Celebrations Begin! (Esther 9: 18-22)

On the fifteenth day all the Jews in the Persian Empire celebrated. They rested, feasted and made it a day of joy!

### A Day Of Remembrance (Esther 9: 23-32)

Mordecai wrote to all the Jews in the land instructing them always to celebrate on this day. They were to establish a new custom so that the future generations would always remember how God saved them from their enemies. This day of feasting is called Purim and is still celebrated by Jews today.

### The Greatness Of Mordecai (Esther 10)

The final short chapter tells us how Mordecai became a great ruler in the land. He was trusted by the King, held in high esteem by his fellow Jews and he worked tirelessly for the good of his people.

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**cell**outlines | **week three** (continued...)

- Which bit of the story stood out for you the most and why?
- Where can you already see God at work?
- What are you looking forward to about studying the book of Esther in more detail in the coming weeks?
- What areas of your life do you want God to speak to you about through the story of Esther?

Pray together now. Thank God for the book of Esther and for the inspirational story it provides. Ask God to speak clearly to each of you over the next few weeks as you delve deeper into the life of Esther. Commit yourself to being open to hear all that God wants to say to you individually and as a group.

**This week:** Read through the whole ten chapters of Esther in the Bible and familiarise yourself with the story. (Use the overview of the story above to help!)

Memorise Esther 4: 14 and talk to God about what things he may have for you to do for him this week.

