The answer is that God never wastes a life. People may waste their own lives, but God always has a purpose for His people. The Book of Esther tells how a young Jewish woman in Persia found out what God wanted her to do. Perhaps in reading her story you will gain insight into God's purpose for your life.

Esther CONTENTS

Ahasuerus (1:1)
Also known as Xerxes I, this powerful king of Persia ruled an empire that stretched from India to Ethiopia.

God used this Jewish orphan to save His people from a murderous plot.

This strong woman was deposed as queen of Persia after she refused to entertain her husband's guests by parading her beauty.

Esther's older cousin used his position as a royal official to expose and undo a plot against his people the Jews.

This vicious enemy of the Jews may have been a descendant of Agag, the king of the Amalekites, the people whom Saul was supposed to have completely destroyed (1 Sam. 15:20)

Some men today seem afraid that women are becoming too assertive and independent. Yet the book of Esther shows the value of a strong-willed woman.

The means of Haman's execution may have been an early form of crucifixion.

The seeds of sin that we fail to root out today may spring up in later generations and yield a harvest of evil.

Sometimes you may face circumstances about which you have little insight. You may wonder what God is up to. When that happens, you can engage in the same kind of reflection Mordecai used.
Throughout history, people of faith have struggled to identify the conditions, if any, under which war is justifiable. Is there such a thing as a "just war"? Esther held on to her Jewish ways and remained identified with her people, despite her marriage to the Persian king Ahasuerus.

You'll Find It in Esther

Esther is chosen to be queen.
Esth. 1
Haman conspires to destroy the Jews.
Esth. 3
Esther foils Haman's plot, and he is hanged.
Esth. 7
The feast called Purim is established.
Esth. 9:20–28

Author and Setting

The exact identity of the author of Esther is uncertain, although Esth. 9:20 and 32 imply that Esther's cousin Mordecai may have written at least part of the account.

The events took place in Shushan, one of three royal cities of the Persian Empire (see Esth. 1:2), and in the Persian provinces where the Jews had settlements. The reign of King Ahasuerus (probably Xerxes I; see Esth. 1:1) in 486–465 a.d. provides an approximate date for the book.

The "Secular" Book of the Bible

Esther is the only book of the Bible that does not mention or even allude to God. In that sense, it is the "secular" book of Scripture. For that reason, the meaning of Esther has been debated for centuries. Some have denied that it should be regarded as God's Word. Others have defended its inspiration, but then ignored it. Some early Christians allegorized it, and some modern Christians have spiritualized it. Interestingly, many Christians in Iran, the modern-day successor to ancient Persia, where the story took place, take a very literal view.

Questions about the interpretation of Esther will probably continue, but two lines of thought are worth considering. First, even though God's name does not appear in the book, God's purposes do. A theological high point occurs in the narrative when Mordecai informs his young cousin Esther about a genocidal plot against the Jews. He warns her that she is mistaken if she thinks that she can escape death simply because she has been named queen.

Then Mordecai challenges Esther to act. He seems unaffected if she chooses not to: "If you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place," he confidently says (Esth. 4:14), in what is taken as a quiet display of faith in God's protection. Then he adds, "Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Mordecai's searching question suggests that he was aware that God was working out His purposes. He was raising the hopeful possibility that nothing had happened in Esther's life merely by accident, chance, or human choice. Something—or Someone—had placed her in the strategic position where she now found herself.

Apparently Esther concurred, because she asked Mordecai to have all the Jews fast for her for three days—clearly an act of religious devotion (see "The Value of Fasting" at 1 Chr. 10:12).

However, as significant as these statements are, the book also has a troubling side, which raises a different possibility for thinking about Esther. After Haman's plot is exposed and he is executed, the tables are turned and the Jews are allowed to destroy their enemies. At first they kill more than 500 men (Esth. 9:1–10). Then Esther asks for a second day of vengeance, and they kill 75,300 (9:15–17).

Curiously, the Bible mentions but does not comment on this massacre. Is it possible that God disapproved of what happened, particularly on the second day? These Jews had not returned to Judah. They were remaining in the land of exile. Was that what the Lord wanted? Was Mordecai's feast of Purim, established to celebrate this slaughter, a divinely sanctioned feast, like Passover? Scripture does not tell us either way.

1:1 **Names means:** "Mighty man."

Shushan (Susa)

1:2

- Ancient capital and center of culture for Elam, about 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf in modern-day Iran.
- Possibly a religious center, with a ziggurat (tower) to one of the chief Elamite gods.
- Designated by Cyrus (559–530 a.d.) as one of three royal cities of the Persian Empire.
- Mentioned in one of Daniel's visions (Dan. 8:2).
- Home of Ahasuerus (probably Xerxes I, 485–464 a.d.), who made Esther his queen.
- One of the most prized cities captured by Alexander the Great and the site of a mass marriage ceremony between Greek officers and royal women of Persia.
- Traditional burial site of the prophet Daniel.
- Site at which numerous Mesopotamian artifacts have been found, including the code of Hammurabi.

Every Man King of His Own Castle

1:22 Fear of women learning to assert themselves is nothing new, as the account of Esther shows. Queen Vashti's refusal to parade her beauty at her husband's men-only, week-long drinking-fest (Esth. 1:5–12) was officially interpreted as nothing less than an act of rebellion against male authority (1:16–17). As a result, King Ahasuerus fired off a decree intended to reinforce the mastery of every male in the empire over the women in his household (1:22).

It would be perilous to try to judge ancient cultures and customs against modern-day understandings of gender issues. Nevertheless, it seems clear that some of the men of Persia felt threatened by Vashti's self-will. Perhaps they feared the social chaos that might result if women refused to comply with their husbands' wishes, no matter how degrading those wishes might be.

Many men today display similar fears about assertive and independent women. The Book of Esther can help by showing the value of a woman with strong character. Vashti's successor, Esther, also showed assertiveness by not waiting to be called by Ahasuerus, but entering into his presence on her own initiative, at the risk of her life (4:11; 5:1–3). As a result, she saved her people the Jews from genocide.

Esther is hardly the Bible's last word on the subject of authority in male-female relationships (see "Submission" at Eph. 5:21–29, and "Submission" at James 4:7). But it seems to encourage women to speak their minds and assert their wills to combat evil and promote good.

The Second Invasion of Jerusalem

2:6 *Esther and Mordecai's great-grandparents were taken away to Babylon during the second invasion of Jerusalem (599–597 a.d.), which occurred during the reign of Jeconiah (or Jehoiachin, Esth. 2:6; see Jer. 52:31). To learn about the circumstances surrounding this deportation, see "King Jehoiachin's Captivity" at Ezek. 1:2.*

2:7 **Name may mean:** "Star."

Ahasuerus' Concubines

2:14 *It was common in the ancient world for powerful rulers to have sizeable harems of concubines (Esth. 2:14; compare 1 Kin. 11:3). These women were often the captured wives of conquered rulers and their nobles. Kept as virtual slaves, they were used as wives to bear children, especially sons. Learn more at Gen. 30:3–13 about some of the concubines mentioned in the Bible.*

2:21 **Name:** Probably a Hebrew form of Mardukaya, a common Babylonian name derived from Marduk, a Babylonian god.

Would-be assassins Bigthan and Teresh were "hanged on a gallows" (Esth. 2:23), but the

punishment was probably not hanging as we know it today but impalement. As far as we know, rope hangings were not used in Persia during the biblical period, and the word translated "gallows" refers not to a scaffold but to a pole or stake.

3:1 Not to be confused with: Heman the singer, a temple musician in the days of David.

New Acquaintances—Old Enemies

3:2–6 New Acquaintances—Old Enemies

Sin involves more than just personal misdeeds. It can extend into family histories and become incorporated into public policy and cultural systems. The enmity between Haman and Mordecai (Esth. 3:2–6) showed that principle at work.

At first glance, the hostility between the two men appears to be a simple case of disrespect on Mordecai's part (3:2)—possibly for religious reasons, although the text does not say—and racial prejudice on Haman's (3:6). However, further investigation reveals that the encounter outside the palace of Ahasuerus was not the first time that the people of Haman and the people of Mordecai had met.

The Book of Esther stresses that Haman was the son of Hammedatha the Agagite (3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24). Tradition holds that the Agagites were descendants of Agag, the Amalekite king whom Saul, Israel's first king, had failed to kill, disobeying the Lord's instruction (1 Sam. 15). The Amalekites stood under the permanent judgment of God for attacking the Israelites during their journey from Egypt to Canaan (Ex. 17:8–13; Deut. 25:17–19).

Now, with Haman's rise to power, the Amalekites were in a sense threatening once again to destroy God's people. But this time, the Lord used Mordecai to frustrate the plan. Ironically, Mordecai was descended from Kish (Esth. 2:5)—the same family of Benjamites from which Saul had come (1 Sam. 9:1). Thus, in the end, Mordecai carried out what Saul had failed to accomplish (Esth. 7:10; 9:4–5, 13–15).

Perhaps neither Mordecai nor Haman knew about the long-standing enmity between their two peoples. Nevertheless, their conflict illustrates that personal sin can be passed on to one's children, and in turn to their children. Over the years, it can become imbedded in the very life of a culture. That legacy of sin may lie dormant for generations, then suddenly flare up, as it did in Haman's case, in institutionalized evil (3:9).

For that reason, it is not enough just to live a good life personally, as important as that is. To root out evil requires the renewal of systems. That may involve new laws that honor godly values or the repeal of bad laws that work against godly values. In either the case, the point is that we cannot be too careful when it comes to sin. The seeds of sin that we fail to root out today may spring up in later generations and yield a harvest of evil.

The Amalekites were descended from Esau, Isaac's older son. The enmity between the Israelites and the Amalekites dated to the beginning of both peoples. See 1 Sam. 15:2–3.

4:14 Who Knows?

Suppose you lived in a time and place where you did not have the Bible as a moral or theological compass. How would you know what God was up to as you tried to interpret the events of life? Mordecai faced that problem as he lived in Persia sometime during the reign of Ahasuerus (486–465 a.d.).

One would never know from the Book of Esther that Mordecai's people, the Jews, had been chosen to be the Lord's people, or that the Lord had given them His Law, had spoken to them through His prophets, and was using the exile to chasten them for their disobedience against Him. In fact, the book does not even mention God—a fact that caused some to question whether Esther belonged in Scripture.

Thus it might seem that Mordecai and the Jews had little to guide them as they faced the prospect of annihilation (Esth. 3:13). Mordecai reacted with mourning (4:1), but did so in a way that caught the attention of his cousin Esther (4:2–9). Apparently he challenged her to speak to the king on her people's behalf (4:10–12).

Then Mordecai made a reflective statement that suggests he was aware that God was working out His purposes: "Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" he asked his cousin. Who knows? Mordecai could not be certain, but he was proposing the idea that the remarkable turn of events in Esther's life—becoming the queen of Persia—had not come about by accident. She was placed in a strategic position at a timely moment to carry out a purpose. Whose purpose? Mordecai does not say, but the fact that he and Esther were Jews makes it plain that the Lord's hand was behind it all.

Like Mordecai and Esther, you may face circumstances about which you have little if any insight. Whether or not Scripture is silent on the issue, you may wonder what God is up to. What does it all mean? In moments like these, you can engage in the kind of reflection that Mordecai practiced—comparing the events of life with what you know about God to suggest what His purposes might be. The same God who worked through Esther is at work in your life today. Who knows what circumstances He might bring you into "for such a time as this"?

The kind of thinking that Mordecai practiced has been called theological reflection, a somewhat fancy phrase with a simple meaning: to consider how God may be working in one's life. To find out more about this valuable habit and other Bible characters who engaged in it see "Celebrating God's Guidance" at Gen. 45:5–8.

Applying wisdom and discernment to one's faith requires an understanding not only of Scripture, but also of the world in which Scripture must be applied. See "Understanding the Times" at 1 Chr. 12:32.

Courage and Conviction

5:1–5 *Esther's bold gesture of seeking an unscheduled audience with the king (Esth. 5:1–5) showed a great deal of courage. Access to the Persian ruler was limited to those summoned by him. Anyone who violated this policy could be punished by death. Yet Esther's faith, encouraged by her cousin Mordecai, gave her the resolve to speak up on behalf of her people.*

Esther and Mordecai are two of the many "Models of Faith in Hostile Societies" to be found in the Bible. See the table at Dan. 2:48–49.

9:1–5 A Just War, or Just a War?

Throughout history, people of faith have struggled to identify the conditions, if any, under which war is justifiable. All agree that war is a terrible evil, but many have felt that under some circumstances, it is

unavoidable. In ancient Persia, thanks to the courage of Queen Esther and the permission of King Ahasuerus (Esth. 8:3–6, 11), the Jews fought a limited war of revenge on their enemies until they had destroyed almost all of them (9:1–5).

Was this bloodshed justifiable? It would be if measured against a set of criteria developed by church leaders Augustine in the fifth century and Aquinas in the thirteenth century. According to that tradition, a particular war is a "just war," and not "just a war," if it passes a number of tests, as follows:

- **A just war pursues a "just cause" or "right intention," such as self-defense, in the face of an obvious, one-sided evil; this assumes that those who engage in the "just war" have mostly righteous purposes as their motives.**
- **A just war is declared and directed by a "competent government authority."**
- **A just war is joined as a last resort only after exhausting all peaceful means such as diplomatic channels, economic sanctions, and the like.**
- **A just war must conform to the "law of proportionality"—the "greater good" or "lesser of two evils"; that is, the anticipated good results must outweigh the actual bad effects of damage done.**
- **A just war must be "redemptive," that is, fought in a way that leaves room for the two warring parties to reconcile when the war is over.**
- **A just war is always "discriminate" and fought in terms of "limited engagement" that precludes looting, massacres, or engagements that would harm noncombatants.**
- **A just war must be waged with at least a "probability" of winning.**
- **A just war must allow exemption for conscientious objectors.**

It would be instructive to measure the wars fought over the centuries against these principles. And assessing potential conflicts by using these guidelines (or similar ones) coud help nations limit military involvements to situations that are truly worth fighting for.

In considering the issue of just war, it's important to remember that government is an institution established by God, and that God raises up and brings down leaders and governments according to His sovereign purposes. See "Governmental Authority" at Gen. 2:23; "No Authority Except from God" at Ps. 2:4–6; and "Governmental Authority" at Rom. 13:2.

9:26–28 Cultural Assimilation

We live in a time of heightened ethnic conflicts the world over. On every continent, groups vie with each other to maintain cultural identities, and sometimes to establish cultural dominance. The Bible speaks to these issues particularly through the Old Testament books of Ruth and Esther. Ruth, a woman of Moab, assimilated into Hebrew culture by forsaking her ethnic roots and marrying Boaz (see the Introduction to the Book of Ruth). By contrast, Esther held onto her Jewish ways and remained identified with her people, despite her marriage to the Persian king Ahasuerus.

Which of these two approaches should God's people adopt? This has long been a difficult issue to decide. The fact that the Jews of Esther's time didn't assimilate into Persian society may have had something to do with the racial discrimination evidenced by Haman's plot against the Jews. After the plot failed, the feast of Purim (Esth. 9:26–28) became a permanent expression of Jewish identity.

Purim is from the word pur, *meaning "lots," which were cast to determine the day on which the extermination of the Jews was to take place (3:7). This feast celebrated God's deliverance of His people* within *a dominant culture—in this case, Persia. By contrast,*

the feast of Passover celebrated God's deliverance **out of a dominant culture, Egypt (see Luke 22:7).**

Feasts and fasts such as these became some of the means by which the Jews maintained their cultural identity over the centuries. These traditions became invaluable when the people no longer had a land to live in, or a temple at which to worship, or priests. By keeping the feasts, especially Passover and Purim, they were able to remember who they were when there were no more familiar landmarks to point to or shrines to visit. Passover reminded them that God could liberate His people by bringing them out of an oppressive setting. Purim reminded them that that even if He left them in an oppressive setting, He would still be with them.

Similarly, Christians have two seasons that honor the Lord Jesus Christ in a special way—Advent, which leads to the holiday of Christmas, and Lent, which leads to Easter. The one season celebrates the birth of Christ, the other His death and resurrection. Both provide tangible reminders of the salvation He has brought us, and of our hope in Him.

Like the ancient Hebrews, believers today need to work at remembering God's work among us. See "The Value of Traditions" at Ex. 12:26–27.

To see a table of the feasts of Israel, see Luke 2:42.