



# INTRODUCTION

God's people have known their fair share of enemies.

Sixteen hundred years before the story of Esther began, God made an amazing promise to Abraham that He would make a great nation come from his tiny family—a people more numerous than the stars in the sky.

But many enemies would try to ruin that plan.

Five hundred years before Esther lived, the mighty Goliath and the Philistines threatened David and God's people.

Exactly 100 years before Esther, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire destroyed God's temple in Jerusalem. They carried God's people far from home and into exile.

And just 60 years earlier, a den of lions all but assured the death of the prophet Daniel.

Now, 60 years after conquering the fearsome Babylonians, there was a new threat to God's people—Persia.

The Persian army was strong, their numbers great, their cities grand, and their dominance unmatched.

In those days, the Persian kings' egos spread as far and wide as their rule and reign. They would stop at nothing to ensure that their own power might increase, guaranteeing the throne for their sons and their sons' sons after them.

But egos and power didn't just stop with the kings. Everyday Persian people were used to getting what they wanted, too. Spoiled and entitled, they had an unquenchable thirst for wealth, power, and beauty.

In those days, there was no room for a "capital-G God" in Persia. And unless He wanted to serve their selfish purposes, there was certainly no space for One who might want to rule over hearts.

Over a century earlier, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire captured and scattered God's people far from their homes, where they were slaves in exile for 70 years. When the Persians conquered the Babylonians after those 70 years, a first wave of exiles was allowed to return home to rebuild Jerusalem, their capital city.

After that first return, another 60 years passed. For many reasons, most of God's people remained far from home, in the land of their exile.

They had not returned to worship the One True God in the place and way He'd commanded.

But through 70 years of exile and more—whether they'd returned to Jerusalem or stayed back in Persia—God never left His people. Though many Israelites made their home in a foreign land, God had made His home in their hearts.

In this time, one extraordinary girl, clothed not outwardly but inwardly—in strength and dignity, rose to lead God's people.

This is where the story of Esther begins.



# BRIGHT STAR

Esther 1:1-12

Every evening since God created day and night, the same magical events occur. Sometimes we can see them and sometimes not—often it depends on whether or not we're paying attention. Every evening, as the sun burns its last ray of light in our view and sinks just below the horizon, a new sky opens up.

In the stillness, our eyes adjust to the fading colors. First, we notice one faint pop of light and then another. Then, finally, if we have eyes to see, the entire expanse lights up, filled with dazzling, winking stars. As our eyes adjust to behold them, they seem to stand taller, and shine brighter and brighter.

There once lived a girl just like this—a girl who, though she had flowing hair and dazzling eyes, shone more vividly from within. In fact, this girl's name even meant "star." Her circumstances made her a very unexpected heroine, but she was a heroine nonetheless, and her name was Esther.

"Oh, goody!" You might say, "An adventure story!"

And indeed, you would be correct.  
So cozy up and lean in close,  
for this is a Bible story unlike any other,  
with a heroine unlike any other.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves,  
for this is the story of a hero's journey,  
and for our hero to emerge,  
we must first find her in grave danger...

There was once a gigantic empire called Persia that stretched over 127 provinces from India all the way to Ethiopia. Persia's capital, Susa, was full of grand buildings, stylish people, and delicious food.

Susa even had the most powerful leader on earth, King Ahasuerus (pronounced uh-haz-yoo-eer-uhs, and sometimes called King Xerxes). Of course, this majestic leader threw the best parties in all the land. One of his wild shindigs even lasted for six months!

At the end of one of these especially long parties, the king invited his closest friends to stay for some extra fun. Curtains flowing like waterfalls surrounded the splendid room, and candlelight danced off the golden goblets. Tables dripped with delicacies brought in from all over the empire, and pitchers overflowed with the finest wines. King Ahasuerus really must have had it all... or did he?

You may not find it terribly surprising that this was a false empire, a hollow shell of a kingdom where all the power, beauty, and wealth hid a far darker truth.



□ PERSIAN EMPIRE

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FOR SCALE,  
THE STATE OF  
TEXAS

INDIA

INDUS RIVER

INDIAN OCEAN

ARAL SEA

CASPIAN SEA

PERSIA

PERSIAN GULF

BABYLONIA

MEDIA

NINEVEH

SUSA

BABYLON

BLACK SEA

LYDIA

SARDIS

THRACE

ATHENS

TIGRIS RIVER

EUPHRATES RIVER

ALEPPO

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

JERUSALEM

RED SEA

EGYPT

NILE RIVER

PERSEPOLIS

HORMOZIA

Behind Persia's greatness was a terrible place, full of empty people who lived only for themselves—foolish, faithless, heartless, and ruthless.

After seven days of eating and drinking, the king sent word to his wife, Queen Vashti. He asked her to appear before the king and his friends so that they might appreciate her beauty.

But Queen Vashti said, "No."

The wind calmed as the sun dipped beneath the horizon. The night stilled into a silence so quiet that Vashti's "no" echoed throughout the empire. No one denied the king, not even the queen.

Maybe Queen Vashti was frustrated with the king's behavior and his friends' willingness to go along with it. Perhaps she didn't want to leave the party she was throwing nearby. Or it's possible she didn't feel like being paraded around; maybe she wanted to send a message to the king that he couldn't treat her this way. But for reasons we don't know and may never fully understand until heaven—Queen Vashti said, "No."

Queen Vashti's refusal made the king embarrassed and very upset. As his cheeks stung, his throat closed up, and his chest tightened, the king realized he was far more than angry or upset. He was actually enraged.

So enraged that anger burned his skin like the blazing Persian sun.

"How dare the queen refuse me?" he scoffed.

"The queen disrespects us all, my lord," retorted one of his men, just as confounded as the king. "Once all the other ladies in the kingdom hear about this, they'll think, 'If Queen Vashti can do it, so can I!' They'll all start saying 'no' to the men in their lives, too, and we can NOT have that!"



A roar boiled over among the king's men.

"Something must be done!" cried one.

"Women must know their place!" shouted another.

"My lord, if I may," one of the men chimed in. "A letter should be written and sent to all the empire that Queen Vashti is never to appear before the king again. She must be banished, and a new queen found—a better queen—one who respects the master of her household and honors the king!"

King Ahasuerus stroked his beard and considered his options. What to do with the disagreeable Queen Vashti? It didn't take long for the king to agree with his friends, and together they hatched a plan. The queen would be stripped of her status and never allowed to come into the king's presence again.

Furthermore, the king proclaimed to his 127 provinces that all women should obey their husbands, no matter what!



## **Kaleidoscope Corner**

### **Godly Submission**

Do you ever find the Bible confusing?

Often when we read the Bible, it's difficult to remember or even understand that each book of the Bible takes place during a time in history that's very different from our own. Culture changes constantly—but God doesn't. So when we read the Bible, we can try to understand cultural factors and seek to know God, whose heart is always the same toward us.

In much of Bible times, women were considered second-class citizens, under male authority in every way. If a woman had a kind or God-fearing male authority (husband, father, or cousin, as we will see with Esther), she likely enjoyed many freedoms. But if her male authority was not kind or God-fearing, she probably lived under difficult or even threatening circumstances.

Jesus turned the world upside down in just about every way, including how people should honor one another. He made friends with women, hugged children, and dined at the homes of outcasts.

The apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, turned the concept of godly submission upside-down. In Ephesians 5, Paul remarks that we are all called to honor one another in love, as we all obey God. No one should blindly follow another person. Husbands should not force their wives to do anything disrespectful. Instead, they should treat their wives with dignity and honor, even better than the husband treats himself, as this is how Jesus loves us.