

The LORD God of Israel says that he hates divorce

The Lord's second charge against the men of Israel was that many of them had *dealt treacherously* with their wives. They were unfaithful husbands who had divorced their spouses to marry someone else. They had grown tired of those whom they had married in their youth, who had given their best years to looking after them and their children. Many of those women would have been left destitute and God had seen the treachery of their unfaithful husbands who were religious hypocrites (13-14).

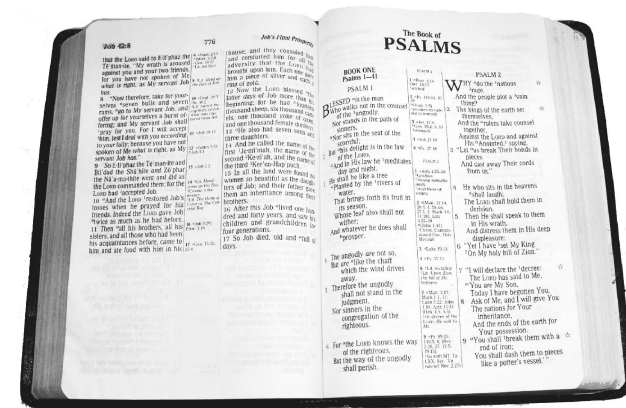
Marriage is a covenant relationship with solemn responsibilities (14). We make promises before God to remain faithful to our spouse until parted by death. It is all too easy for couples to drift apart, even Christian couples. We may hurt each other by uttering thoughtless or unkind words or taking each other for granted. An unhappy Christian marriage hinders Christian testimony; it puts obstacles in the way of the children who sense that their parents are not really sincere in their faith. God gives us our children and we are accountable to him for our attitude and behaviour in the home (Psalm 127:3; Ephesians 6:4).

The LORD God of Israel says that he hates divorce (16).^{*} Verse 16 is difficult to translate. The ESV is probably better: *'For the man who hates and divorces, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garments with violence.'* A husband must love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it (Ephesians 5:25), but there are grounds for divorce in certain circumstances (Matthew 19:8-9). Many Christian marriages are breaking down, causing heartache and misery. **If you are behaving unfaithfully to your spouse or contemplating divorce, God's Word to you is, 'Take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously' (15-16).** Repent of your sin, apologise to your spouse and seek his/her forgiveness. You must save your marriage!

^{*} I knew a dear Christian lady (now with the Lord in heaven) who had been twice deserted by her husband who had been persistently unfaithful. She did what she could to save her marriage and keep her family together but was later divorced. She was barred from the Lord's table at one church where the elder told her that the Lord hates divorce. This was an appalling misuse of this verse from Malachi in a situation which called for understanding and compassion.

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



April 2020

Bible readings from Nehemiah, Esther and Malachi chapters 1 and 2

The daughter of a foreign god

The Lord charged the people with profaning the covenant that he had made with their ancestors and with dealing treacherously with each other (10). The accusation of treacherous dealing is found in five verses and it indicates deceit and unfaithfulness (10,11,14,15,16). God brought two specific accusations against the people:–

- God was their Creator and their Father but many of them had married *the daughter of a foreign god* (10–12). — ‘*The LORD’S holy institution*’ (11) is translated by Iain Duguid as ‘*that which is sacred to the LORD*’, meaning marriage. I believe that this is better than ‘*the sanctuary of the LORD*’ (ESV)
- Many had dealt faithlessly with their wives and had divorced them for no valid reason (13–16).

Intermarriage with the heathen was an act of great unfaithfulness to the covenant that the Lord had made with Israel which explicitly prohibited intermarriage with people of other nations (Deuteronomy 4:31; 7:3–4). God warned that he would cut them off and not accept their offerings (12). The daughters of foreign gods who married into Israel brought their idols into Hebrew households and the children of mixed marriages would grow up in religious confusion. When a Christian marries an unbeliever,

When a Christian engages in courtship or marriage to a non-Christian, he/she is unfaithful to the Lord and also to his people (10); they are disobedient to God’s holy Word (2 Corinthians 6:14). If you are single, I urge you to honour God in all your relationships with others. **Your disobedience is not a private matter. It affects others.** Marriage with an unbeliever will hinder every aspect of your Christian life. Moreover, you will not be able to involve yourself in the Lord’s work without putting pressure on your marriage. You also set a bad example to your children and to the young people in the church by your careless attitude and disobedience to the teaching of the Word of God. **Never, never, contemplate marriage to the son or daughter of ‘a foreign god’. It will blight your life.**

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He turned many away from iniquity

The priests in Malachi's day had no sense of awe before the Almighty and God's message to them continues in these verses:

- A curse threatened (1–4). – God warned them that if they refused to hear and take to heart what he had to say, if they did not give glory to his name, he would curse their blessings (2; cp. Numbers 6:27). The refuse from animal sacrifices was to be taken outside their towns and burned (Leviticus 16:27). God told the priests that these pieces of sacrificial garbage would be spread on their faces and they themselves would be thrown out. Moreover, he would rebuke their descendants (3). This curse was fulfilled. There are no longer any priests in Judaism and the priesthood of the Lord Jesus has superseded that of Levi.
- A covenant remembered (5–7). – They were reminded that God's covenant with the Levites was *one of life and peace* (cp. Numbers 25:11–12). This covenant had obligations. The priest was to fear and to reverence God (5; cp. 1:6). *The law of truth was in his mouth ... he walked with me (God) in peace and equity, and turned many away from iniquity ... He is the messenger of the LORD of hosts* (6–7). **The Christian minister has the same responsibilities! He must be a godly man who loves truth, teaches truth, defends truth and lives truth! He should never measure success by how many he attracts to the church, but by how many he turns away from their sinful ways.**
- A covenant corrupted (8–9). – The priests had departed from the way of God, causing many to stumble at God's holy law. They had corrupted the covenant by their lack of reverence and by their failure to be messengers from God. They showed partiality rather than integrity when they administered God's law and he punished them by causing them to be treated with contempt by all the people.

*When nations are to perish in their sins,
'Tis in the church the leprosy begins.* (William Cowper)

I am doing a great work

The opposition to Nehemiah continued when the wall had been rebuilt (1). His enemies tried a gentle approach with a pretence of friendship. They suggested that Nehemiah meet with them in one of the outlying villages, but he discerned their real intentions and refused to meet them. He sent this message to them, *'I am doing a great work ... Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?'* (2–3). There are some who vainly imagine that we can meet together and work with any who profess to be Christians even though they deny the gospel of the grace of God. They yield to the friendly approach and reason that we must put aside differences and concentrate on the things on which we agree. Such thinking is very misguided and lacks true discernment (Galatians 1:6–9). There can be no true unity with those who deny the infallibility of the Bible, the deity of Christ, his death on the cross to save sinners, his bodily resurrection, and that there is no other way to God except through him.

They sent their message four times and when this failed, Sanballat sent his servant with an open letter in which they falsely accused the Jews of planning a rebellion against the king (6–8). Nehemiah observed, *'They all were trying to make us afraid'* (9). They again failed to weaken Nehemiah's resolve and he called upon God to strengthen his hands.

Nehemiah knew that he was *doing a great work* (3). Jerusalem was the focal point for the worship of God and needed the wall for the protection of the city and temple. All that we do for the Lord is *a great work*, be it preaching, teaching in Sunday School, raising our children in the fear of God, distributing tracts or speaking to others about the Lord. Even small and seemingly insignificant jobs in the church are *'a great work'* for God. **Let us be faithful and persevere in all that the Lord has given us to do and be determined never to give up through the fear of men.** *The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe* (Proverbs 29:25).

Should such a man as I flee?

Shemaiah was a Jew but he was a secret informer to Tobiah and Sanballat who hired him to further their evil schemes. He suggested to Nehemiah that his enemies were planning to kill him and that he should seek refuge in the sanctuary of the temple (10–13). Nehemiah recognised that this was a plot to entice him into fear and unbelief. To flee from danger would have ended his leadership and the work would not have been completed (the gates were yet to be put in place). The people would not continue in the face of threats if their leader deserted them. He responded, *‘Should such a man as I flee?’* (11). His enemies used false prophets and a prophetess against him to make him afraid, but he brought the matter to God in prayer (14).

The Lord helped Nehemiah and the wall was completed in fifty-two days. Nehemiah’s enemies became very disheartened *for they perceived that this work was done by our God* (15–16). There was a problem with some of the Jewish nobles, however. Perhaps they bitterly resented Nehemiah for rebuking them and for his insistence that they restore the property of those who were in their debt (5:7–13). They acted in collusion with Tobiah who was quick to exploit the situation. Tobiah also used his relationship (through marriage) with one of the wall-builders to gain influence (17–18; cp. 3:4,30). They told Nehemiah that Tobiah was a good man and reported Nehemiah’s response to Tobiah, who at the same time was sending letters to frighten him (19).

God’s servant was fearless because he was prayerful and he walked with God. He may have appeared to be hard by his negative responses to the seeming friendly approaches of Tobiah and Sanballat but he knew their real intentions. He saw that great issues were at stake and that the work of God was threatened. **We live in confusing times. Are you brave and bold enough to make a stand for righteousness and truth, or do you flee when the going gets tough? — ‘Should such a man as I flee?’**

Where is my reverence?

The Lord demonstrates in these verses how the priests had despised his holy name. He used irony when he called on the priests to entreat divine favour. How could they really expect God to treat them favourably when there was no one among them with the courage to shut the temple doors and to say, ‘Enough is enough!’ They had failed to protect the house of the Lord from pollution by offering diseased or maimed animals. God would not accept their offerings and he told them that his name (which they despised) would be great among the Gentiles and among the nations (9–11).

The priests also despised their own portion which was given to them from the offerings, but they had only themselves to blame because they accepted second rate offerings for the Lord (12). They also despised their high calling and sneered at the work which God had given to them to do, saying, *‘Oh, what a weariness!’* (13). There is a difference between the tiredness and exhaustion that comes through hard work and the weariness that comes through boredom and lack of enthusiasm. Iain Duguid writes, ‘This passage challenges the casual attitude with which we come to worship God. ... We too can be going through the motions of worship — even orthodox, correct motions — but none the less be wasting our time and wearying the Lord’ (HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, MALACHI, page 205). If your Christian life and service has become a dull routine, is it because you have been drifting away from the Lord and grown cold in heart?

What problem lay behind the shallowness and hypocrisy of the priests? They did not fear God who asked them, *‘Where is my reverence?’* (6). They needed the timely reminder, *‘I am a great King,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘and my name is to be feared among the nations’* (14). **If we lack reverence or show carelessness in our worship of God and in service for him, we too despise the name of the Lord. — Since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire** (Hebrews 12:28–29).

In what way have we despised your name?

The third commandment forbids us to take the name of the Lord in vain (Exodus 20:7) and we pray in the Lord's Prayer, '*Hallowed be your name*' (Matthew 6:9). The name of God is important because it reveals his character and Malachi uses the title, '*the LORD of hosts*' ('Yahweh Sabaoth') more than twenty times in his prophecy. This title conveys the greatness and the sovereignty of God, who rules over all the hosts or 'powers' in heaven and earth. God's name is great and to be feared (11,14). We should be overwhelmed with awe as we meditate upon the great and holy name of the Lord.

The message of verse 6 through to chapter 2, verse 9 is directed at the priests. They had despised the name of the Lord and were insensitive to the seriousness of their sin. They asked, '*In what way have we despised your name?*' (6). The Lord then told them that they had despised his name, rebuking them for offering to him blind, lame and sick animals (8,13–14) when they knew that only the best is good enough for God (Leviticus 1:3, 3:1; 4:3; 22:19–24). They were sacrificing to God, animals which they would not dare to offer to their civil governor (8). How dare they treat God with such contempt?

The Lord Jesus left the glory of heaven and gave himself to suffer a gruesome death to save us. **He will not accept the 'left-overs' of our time, our talents, our money. If we offer him second-rate service, and do not give to him our very best, we despise his great name.**

*Lord, in the fulness of my might,
I would for thee be strong;
While runneth o'er each dear delight
To thee should soar my song.*

*O not for thee my weak desires,
My poorer, baser part!
O not for thee my fading fires,
The ashes of my heart!*

(Thomas Hornblower Gill)

For he was a faithful man

The wall with its gates was now complete and gatekeepers, singers and Levites were appointed to their tasks (1). The long list from verse 6 onwards contains the names of the people who had returned to Jerusalem eighty years earlier. Nehemiah appointed his brother Hanani who had led a delegation from Judah to tell him of the plight of Jerusalem (1:2) and Hananiah to be responsible for the security of the city (2–3). Look at the description given of Hananiah: *He was a faithful man, and feared God more than many* (2; cp. 5:15). Faithful men and women love, obey and serve God. Nehemiah knew that they had many enemies who wanted to destroy Jerusalem, and faithful men were needed to look after her interests. The same is true of the church today. Satan has unleashed one attack after another and many good churches have been infiltrated with false teaching and/or lethargy. The need of the hour is for faithful men and women!

If you want God to use you and to make you a blessing, faithfulness is essential. Those who would serve God must be faithful. You must be faithful to God and to truth (1 Corinthians 4:1–2; 2 Timothy 2:2). Faithfulness involves wholehearted commitment. Faithfulness means seeking to please Christ in whatever you do. How faithful are you? On the day of judgment, will you hear the commendation of the Lord Jesus, '*Well done, good and faithful servant*' (Matthew 25:21)?

Nehemiah also gave instructions concerning the gates of Jerusalem. They were not to be opened at sunrise, which was the usual practice in those times, but later when the sun was well up in the sky. This would enable them to see clearly that there was no danger from hidden invaders. The gates were to be shut and barred at night and the people were to supply guards to watch out for enemies (3). Nehemiah would no doubt have remembered that Babylon had fallen to the Persians through neglecting to keep watch from its strong fortifications. The people of Jerusalem could not afford to be careless. An added problem was that Jerusalem was underpopulated because very few houses remained (4).

The people ... rejoiced greatly, because they understood

The people gathered in the open in Jerusalem and asked Ezra to read to them *the Book of the Law of Moses*. The reading was interspersed with explanation and continued from morning (sunrise) until midday (1–3). This was no dry reading exercise and the people were attentive. **Notice the emphasis on understanding (2–3,7–8,12–13).** The great need of the church in every age is for powerful, clear preaching of God's Word so that it is understood by all those who hear. *The people ... rejoiced greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them* (12). Real joy, as opposed to that which is worked up by emotionalism, comes from understanding God's Word, when from it we discover the greatness of the Lord, the wonders of our salvation and our privileges and responsibilities as children of God.

The reading and exposition of the Word of God also led the people to weep (9). **How often does the Word of God move you to tears? Tears of gratitude for all that the Lord has done for you, or tears of sorrow when it rebukes you for some sin in your life?** The first day of the seventh month was the Feast of Trumpets (2; cp. Leviticus 23:23–25). Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites who taught the people told them not to sorrow on this holy day *'for the joy of the LORD is your strength'* (9–10).

We must not only strive to understand God's Word but also be ready to obey it. The people realised that they should be observing the Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh month and they obeyed God's Word and set about keeping the feast (14–18; cp. Leviticus 23:33–43).

Do not despise preaching, for it is essential for the health and well-being of the church (2 Timothy 3:16 to 4:4). We need to understand the teaching of God's Word if we are to avoid the deception being propagated by smooth-talking heretics, some of whom claim to be evangelical. Let us pray that the Lord will be pleased to raise up preachers and teachers of his Word and that he will keep our pastors faithful to himself.

In what way have you loved us?

Nehemiah was not the only man to be deeply concerned by the religious decline in Jerusalem. Malachi also came with a message that burdened his heart. Many modern versions of the Bible render the Hebrew word translated *'burden'* (1) as *'oracle.'* Iain Duguid comments, *'The term "burden" often seems to carry overtones of judgement; thus when a prophet comes to you with a burden, it is not necessarily good news'* (HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, MALACHI, page 190).

Malachi brought the people a direct message from the living God, *'I have loved you,' says the LORD, yet you say, "In what way have you loved us?"'* (2). The Lord answered this insolent question by reminding them how he had chosen Israel (descendants of Jacob) and had freely bestowed his love upon them. He pointed out that the nation of Edom (descended from Jacob's twin brother, Esau) which had become Israel's treacherous foe, no longer existed (3–4). The descendants of both Jacob and Esau had been repeatedly wicked. Why was it that Israel still survived as a nation, whereas Edom, which had escaped the trauma of Babylonian captivity, was a wasteland? It was because God hadn't any loving purposes for Edom whose land would be called *'the Territory (border) of Wickedness'*. Their cities would never be rebuilt and the Jews would see this and say, *'The LORD is magnified beyond the border of Israel'* (4–5). How could the Jews ask God, *'In what way have you loved us?'*

How can Christians know that God loves us when we are struggling with loneliness, severe loss, disappointment or poverty? One of Satan's tactics is to encourage us to forget all that the Lord has done for us and to make us think hard thoughts of God. The Lord chose us and set his love upon us before he created the world. He gave his beloved Son to die a terrible death to save us from our sins. He has given us eternal life and has brought us into fellowship with himself and given us a throne of grace where we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. We expect a bright tomorrow; all will be well! **Let us count our blessings each day and we will then be kept from complaining.**

MALACHI

4 APRIL

Nehemiah 9:1–21

But you are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful

The date of Malachi's prophecy is uncertain but it is likely that it was around the time of Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem from Babylon in 432 BC (both men deal with the problem of mixed marriages, the neglect of tithing, and of corrupt priests – Nehemiah 13:6–31; Malachi 2:1–11; 3:8). The name 'Malachi' means 'my messenger.' Three messengers are mentioned in his prophecy – the priest (2:7), the forerunner (3:1) and the Messenger of the covenant (3:1).

The exiles who had returned from Babylon fell into backsliding after the rebuilding of the temple and later, the wall of Jerusalem. The unfaithfulness of the Jews was quite frightening! As the Lord proclaimed his love for them, they had the audacity to reply, '*In what way have you loved us?*' (1:2). They questioned God in this manner on another six occasions (1:6; 1:7; 2:17; 3:7; 3:8; 3:13). Let us be determined to take the message of Malachi to heart so that we do not lose sight of our responsibility to honour God in our lives.

Outline of Malachi

1. The Lord's love for Israel – 1:1–5
2. The Lord's name despised by Israel – 1:6–14
3. The Lord's covenant corrupted – 2:1–17
 - By unfaithful priests (2:1–9).
 - By unfaithful husbands and mixed marriages (2:10–17)
4. The coming of the forerunner and of Christ – 3:1–6
5. God is robbed – 3:7–12
6. God is slandered – 3:13–15
7. The joy of the godly and the judgment of the wicked – 3:16 to 4:6

Recommended commentary for Malachi:

T.V. Moore: Haggai & Malachi (published by Banner of Truth).

Iain M. Duguid: Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi (published by Evangelical Press).

Soon after the end of the Feast of Tabernacles, the Israelites met in a solemn assembly with fasting and mourning (1). They separated themselves from all who were not God's people and confessed their sins and those of their ancestors (2). *The Book of the Law* was read to them again for one-fourth of the day (3; this is most likely a quarter of daylight hours, three hours (cp. John 11:9 where Jesus describes the Jewish day as lasting twelve hours). There was another three hours for the confession of sin and the worship of God. The Levites stood on stairs (raised platforms) and with a loud voice led the people in prayer. This beautiful prayer exalts the living God and gives us an inspired account of Old Testament history (5–38; cp. Psalms 105 and 106).

Here are some of the things that we learn from the prayer:–

- There is only one God who created and sustains the universe (6).
- God sovereignly chooses men (eg. Abraham) and deals with us by covenant (7–8,32).
- God is faithful – '*You have performed your words, for you are righteous*' (8; cp. verse 33).
- God is the God who works wonders (10–11).
- God is bountiful in his provision for his people. He gave Israel guidance (12); his law (13–14); food (15) and the Holy Spirit to instruct them (20). He met their every need (21) and gave them the land of Canaan (22–25).
- God is marvellous in his grace, mercy and kindness. Despite their many experiences of God's goodness, the Israelites still rebelled against him (16–18, 26–30). '*But you are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness*' (17). How wonderful! God is ready to pardon. **If your heart is not right with God, confess your sin to him and repent of it. He is always ready to pardon. He is abundant in kindness.**

Who is a pardoning God like thee?

Or who has grace so rich and free? (Samuel Davies)

Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against you

We saw yesterday how confession of sin is interwoven with worship (2–3). Confession is very important but we must never become so preoccupied with our own failing and unworthiness that we do not look to the Lord or worship him; the Levites did this when they praised God for his faithfulness, grace and mercy (17).

The prayer goes on to remember the goodness of God in giving the land of Canaan to the Israelites but it also recalls their ingratitude and rebellion against God (22–30). *They ... delighted themselves in your great goodness. Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against you, cast your law behind their backs and killed your prophets* (25–26). The Lord punished them by withdrawing his protection when they faced their enemies (27). They wanted the blessings of God's goodness but they were not prepared to live up to their obligation to serve the Lord and to obey his Word.

The history of Israel sets forth the patience of God. He delivered them many times when they cried to him in distress (28). Their repentance was not lasting, however; but God was patient with them for many years and warned them by his Holy Spirit speaking through the prophets (29–30). The Levites led the people to confess to God, *'You are just in all that has befallen us; for you have dealt faithfully, but we have done wickedly'* (33). They made a covenant with God and set it down in writing which the leaders and priests then signed (38).

We must never take God's goodness and his patience for granted. If we have not truly repented of our sin, we must beware of being lulled into complacency. A day of judgment is coming. Do not *despise the riches of his goodness, forbearance and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath* (Romans 2:4–5).

The month which was turned from sorrow to joy for them

The Jews celebrated their deliverance with feasting and exchanging presents (18–19). Mordecai wrote to Jews throughout the empire and urged them to celebrate their great deliverance every year (20–21). This celebration is known as Purim which refers to 'Pur', the casting of the lot (26–28). The two day feast (27) celebrated *the month which was turned from sorrow to joy for them*, included the practice of *sending presents to one another and gifts to the poor* (22). Mordecai went on to become very great and he used his influence to seek the good of his people (10:2–3).

Ahasuerus was a great king – and the writer of the book is not afraid to admit it (10:1–2). Mordecai became a great man and was universally honoured. His greatness is recorded even in the annals of the Median and Persian kings. **But neither Ahasuerus nor Mordecai is the real hero of our story.** We have seen throughout the hand of God who in sovereign power protects his people, and turns their sorrow into gladness. The feast of Purim was not instituted to celebrate the greatness of Ahasuerus but God's salvation.

The Book of Esther is rich in its teaching and we need its words of warning and encouragement today. It speaks clearly to those of us who are becoming entangled by worldly ambitions for ourselves or our children. It warns us of the tragic consequences that can result. It calls us to immediate repentance. It speaks too, however, to those of us who are already experiencing the bitter consequences of such worldliness. **It assures us that it is not too late!** As we repent of our sins, God is still able to take them up and somehow bring good out of them. He is able to work out the whole situation for his glory and our blessing.

Iain Duguid comments, 'The kingdom of Ahasuerus has passed away ... Here on earth, we are constantly still involved in a life-and-death struggle with the forces of evil. But it will not always be so. The day is coming when our King will return to claim his throne and the days of the evil empire will end' (COMMENTARY, page 126).

The opposite occurred

Haman had determined by lot that the Jews would be slaughtered on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month and that all their possessions would be plundered (1; cp. 3:7,13). When the time came for the this first decree of the king to be enforced, there was much bloodshed. The Jews (with the help of state officials) defended themselves from their enemies (2–5). They destroyed five hundred in Shushan and the next day a further three hundred were slain in the city, and Haman’s ten sons were hanged (6–15). Seventy-five thousand were killed throughout the rest of the empire. This demonstrates the enmity of so many towards the Jews, who rested on the fourteenth day of the month and made it a day of feasting and gladness (16–17).

There were probably two million Jews scattered throughout the empire and they were saved from certain death. Their enemies had hoped to destroy them but *the opposite occurred* (1). The Jews did not take advantage of the slaughter to plunder the property of their enemies (15–16). Their campaign was well-disciplined and they were only concerned for justice and to defend themselves.

When we walk with God and delight in him, he works opposites on our behalf! Remember the words of Joseph to his brothers, ‘*You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good*’ (Genesis 50:20). Remember how God turned the curse of Balaam into a blessing (Numbers 23:11; Nehemiah 13:2). – *The opposite occurred*. Let this truth encourage you to persevere in any trial or opposition that you are facing as a Christian. The Lord is infinitely wise and kind and we are never out of his sight or hidden from his care. **He is working all things together for good for those who love him (Romans 8:28)**. Let us now come to him with our joyful praises!

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

(William Cowper)

We will not neglect the house of our God

The chapter begins with a list of those who placed their seal on the covenant (9:38). The verses in our reading describe what was involved in keeping that covenant. We too are bound to God by the new covenant and are ‘*called to be saints*’ (‘separated ones’; 1 Corinthians 1:2). As ‘*saints*’ we consecrate our lives to God:

- We must separate ourselves from all that is sinful. Those who had *knowledge and understanding* separated themselves from the heathen people around them (28–31). They *entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law*. This means that they solemnly promised to obey God and accepted that they would be cursed if they failed to keep his commandments (cp. Deuteronomy 27:11 to 28:68). Two examples of separation are emphasised:

- a. They were not to inter-marry with the heathen people of the land (30). The Bible is quite clear! Believers must not marry unbelievers; this does not allow, however, for those who are saved after their marriage to leave their non-Christian spouse (1 Corinthians 7:13–16, 39; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18; 1 Peter 3:1).

- b. They were to observe the Sabbath and to refrain from any trading on that day. They were also to rest the land every seventh year (31; cp. Leviticus 25:2–4). We have the Lord’s Day which ‘is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath’ (1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, chapter 22). This is a day of rest from our worldly employment to be set apart for worship and to undertake works of mercy and any necessary duties.

- We must separate ourselves to support the work of God. In times of national declension, the support of the priests and Levites in their work was neglected (cp. 2 Chronicles 29:3–8). The people now promised to bring in their tithes and offerings (32–39). They promised, ‘*We will not neglect the house of our God*’ (39). **If you love the Lord, you will not neglect his house. You will be there to worship him each Lord’s Day and to pray for his work at the prayer meetings. You will support your church with your tithes and offerings.**

The men who willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem

This chapter gives details of those who settled in Jerusalem after the rebuilding of the wall: people from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (4–9), priests (10–14), Levites (15–18) and gatekeepers (19). Jerusalem is described as *‘the holy city’* in verses 1 and 18; it was holy because God had chosen it for himself and had his name there (1 Kings 11:36).

There had not been a rush of volunteers to settle in the rebuilt city and lots were cast to determine who should dwell there (one in ten of the population). Some men did volunteer, however. *And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem* (2). You may wonder why there had not been sufficient volunteers to move home and to live in Jerusalem. It may have been because the city was the focal point of the opposition from their enemies (cp. 4:4–12) and that many men were unwilling to expose their families to danger. To live in Jerusalem required courage! Some of the settlers are described as *‘valiant men’* and as *‘mighty men of valour’* (6,14). Others may not have wished to live in the holy city, which was a centre for religious pilgrimage. In a time of religious renewal they may have been unwilling to accept any restraint on their sinful lifestyles. Jerusalem was a city where God was worshipped and praised (22–23).

Jerusalem is a type of the church which is described as *‘the holy Jerusalem’* in the Bible (Revelation 21:10; cp. Galatians 4:24–26; Hebrews 12:22–23). The Word of God teaches that Christians should join a local church and be involved in its life, service and witness (eg. Acts 2:41–47; Romans 12:4–8; Ephesians 4:12–16). **Your local church needs godly men and women who have courage and zeal to work for the Lord. Have you willingly offered yourself for service in your local church? Have you the gifts and abilities to train for the Lord’s work in a ‘full-time’ capacity?**

Many of the people of the land became Jews

God wonderfully overruled Mordecai’s circumstances bringing him honour and wealth instead of dishonour and death. Esther told the king that Mordecai was related to her and Ahasuerus gave him the signet ring that he had first given to Haman. He also gave Esther the estate, which she put under the control of Mordecai (1–2,7).

Though Haman was dead, the Jews were still in great danger because they had many enemies and the king’s decree could not be cancelled (cp. 1:19; Daniel 6:15). The decree had been published in the first month, after Haman had determined by casting lots, that the slaughter of the Jews should take place in the twelfth month (3:7,13). Esther pleaded with the king to counteract the evil plot of Haman to destroy the Jews (3–5). He responded favourably, allowing Esther and Mordecai to issue a decree in his name which would cancel the effectiveness of the first decree. It was now the third month and there were nine months left for the Jews to prepare to defend themselves. They would be able to act in self-defence and kill all those who sought to destroy them (5–12). With Mordecai elevated to high office (15), only their most bitter enemies would seek to kill them.

The decree was published throughout the empire and *the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad* (15). The Jews were no longer *‘perplexed’* (3:15), but rejoiced that they had been spared the slaughter of those who had done no wrong. Their mourning was turned to gladness and joy because they had been wonderfully delivered from a very evil man. *Then many of the people of the land became Jews, because fear of the Jews fell upon them* (16–17). They had seen the greatness of God in the way he had saved his people. Becoming Jews would mean forsaking idolatry and worshipping the Lord alone. **Let us pray that those around us will see the evidence of God’s work in our lives so that they will be attracted to our great Saviour.**

So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared

Esther revealed at the banquet that her petition was to save her own life and the lives of her people. She said, ‘*We have been sold, my people, and I, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated*’ (1–4). The amazed king asked who could be responsible for such an evil plot (5). Esther informed her husband that the culprit who perpetrated the scheme was Haman. Ahasuerus discovered that Esther was a Jew and that Haman had indeed persuaded him to sanction the destruction of the Jews (3:9).

An angry king went into the palace garden. Haman discovered too late that the queen was one of those people he had plotted to destroy. He knew that he was doomed. He cast himself on Esther’s couch to plead for his life. Haman, who would have unjustly destroyed all the Jews, also suffered an injustice! The king returned and wrongly assumed that Haman was assaulting his queen. One of the eunuchs pointed out that Haman had prepared gallows at his own house for Mordecai who had saved the king’s life. Ahasuerus then ordered that the gallows be used for Haman (6–9). *So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai* (10). The words of Scripture are true: *Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap* (Galatians 6:7).

There is a saying that ‘the devil looks after his own’, and he may well do so until he has no further use for them. Haman found to his great cost and too late that Satan is a terrible master and that the passing pleasures of sin bring a dreadful harvest! God is so different! He faithfully and lovingly cares for all those who belong to him (Hebrews 13:5–6; 1 Peter 5:7).

Iain Duguid writes, ‘God’s people are those who have built their lives around the only truth that will last, the truth of a King who is utterly different from Ahasuerus. We have a King who doesn’t need to be manipulated and cajoled to do what is right. Our King does what is right because he himself is righteous — he cannot do anything other than the right’ (COMMENTARY, page 95).

The joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off

This chapter begins with a list of priests who went to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel in 538 BC (1–7) and their descendants up to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (10–21). There is also a record of the Levites and their descendants (8–9, 22–26). The chapter closes with a short description of the duties of those who *kept the charge of their God* (44–47). They worshipped in the manner commanded in the days of David and Asaph.

The dedication of the wall of Jerusalem was an occasion of great rejoicing; it was a festival of thanksgiving to God (27–43). Levites who were spread throughout the land gathered in Jerusalem. They formed two choirs; one marched in one direction around the wall, the other in the opposite direction (see diagram of the walls following reading for Nehemiah 3:1–7). Ezra led the one choir and the musicians (35–36), while Nehemiah followed the other choir in its procession (38). They then met in the house of God and offered sacrifices to the Lord, who made men, women and children rejoice with great joy. Notice that the children were involved in the service of thanksgiving (40–43). They were not separated from the congregation for their own activities. We can train our children to sit with us in our church services if we make the effort.

The happiness and rejoicing of the people was so great that *the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off* (43). God had honoured the faithful builders and their joy in the Lord was a testimony to the unbelievers around them. Do your family and your friends or your acquaintances at work or college see that the Lord Jesus has made a difference to your life? **Are you a complaining Christian or is your joy seen and ‘heard afar off’?**

*Rejoice, believer in the Lord
Who makes your cause his own,
The hope that’s built on his word
Can ne’er be overthrown.*

(John Newton)

They read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people

There was much joy when the wall around Jerusalem was dedicated and *they read from the Book of Moses (Deuteronomy) in the hearing of the people*. The people were reminded of the need to be separate from the Ammonites and Moabites, and they obeyed (1–3). When God’s Word speaks to your heart and challenges you about something that may be wrong in your life, do you take it seriously enough to obey it and put matters right before the Lord?

The reforms of Nehemiah did not last, however. He had been recalled to the royal court either at Susa or Babylon and may have been absent from Jerusalem for several years. In his absence the spiritual life of the nation deteriorated. Four areas of disobedience are highlighted:–

- Eliashib the high priest was in alliance with Tobiah, a deadly enemy of God’s people (4–9). A grandson of Eliashib married a daughter of Sanballat who was also an enemy (28; cp. 2:19).
- Support for the Levites had lapsed (10–14).
- The Sabbath was being desecrated (15–22).
- There was mixed marriage with heathen neighbours (23–31).

The people had solemnly promised in the covenant they made, to separate themselves from the heathen nations (10:28–30). When he returned to Jerusalem, Nehemiah was horrified to discover that Eliashib had given the wicked Tobiah the temple storeroom to use as living quarters. Tobiah was not only an enemy, but an Ammonite (see verse 1; cp. 2:10; 19–20). Nehemiah was grieved and he threw out all Tobiah’s household possessions and had the place cleansed and restored to its rightful use (4–9)

Eliashib the high priest should have been giving a spiritual lead to the people, but he failed to do so. **When the leadership is rotten, spiritual decline will soon take root in any church.** Pray for your pastor and for your church officers. Satan knows that if he can turn them away from God’s Word to compromise truth, he will gain a strong foothold in the church. How we all need to be on our guard!

You will not prevail against him

God gave Ahasuerus a sleepless night and the restless king had the royal records read to him. The chronicles that were read recorded the account of Mordecai’s action which had thwarted an attempt on his own life. He learned that Mordecai had not been rewarded. Haman arrived at the palace in the morning to seek royal sanction for the execution of Mordecai (1–4). He first had to listen to the king who asked him, ‘*What should be done for the man whom the king delights to honour?*’ Haman was sure that the king must be referring to him. He suggested that such a man be paraded through the city square wearing a royal robe and riding one of the king’s horses. One of the king’s most noble officials should lead the procession, proclaiming that this is the man *whom the king delights to honour* (6–9). The king ordered him to hasten and do this to honour Mordecai (10). Haman had no opportunity to request the execution of Mordecai. God’s ways are truly amazing!

The story stands as a testimony to God’s perfect timing. Haman had slandered the Jews, calling them disloyal and rebellious (3:8–9). But now, at this crucial point in time, the king had been given a sharp reminder that he owed his life to the loyalty of *Mordecai the Jew* (10). Surely it was God who gave Esther the wisdom to delay her request. She now had every reason to hope that the king would be sympathetic to her plea for the Jewish people. God’s timing is perfect!

Haman led the procession in honour of Mordecai and then *hastened to his house, mourning* (11–12). He gloomily recounted the day’s events to his wife and friends. They warned him that it would now be impossible for him to bring about the downfall of Mordecai: ‘*If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him*’ (13). While they were still talking with him, messengers arrived to escort him to Esther’s second banquet, but he did not go merrily (cp. 5:14). – *The triumphing of the wicked is short* (Job 20:5).

The king held out to Esther the golden sceptre

On the third day of the Jewish fast, Esther sought her audience with the king, no doubt supported by the prayers of the Jews. *The king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand* (2), signalling that he was willing to receive her. Not only that, he was willing to lavish upon her whatever she requested, up to half of his kingdom (3). The Lord wonderfully prepared the way ahead and Esther delayed making her petition but asked the king to attend a banquet later that day with Haman as guest. Ahasuerus readily agreed and at the banquet, asked her what it was that she desired. She asked him to attend another banquet the next day with Haman, at which she would make known her request (4–8).

Haman went from the banquet full of joy and full of pride but he was furious when he saw *Mordecai in the king's gate, and that he did not stand or tremble before him*. He boasted to his wife and his friends of his wealth and of the royal favours bestowed upon him, but the sight of *Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate* intensely annoyed him (9–13).

Haman's wife, Zeresh, and his friends advised him to build a high gallows upon which to hang Mordecai (50 cubits = 75 feet or 23 metres). The gallows were built immediately. Haman was not prepared to wait for the day when the Jews were to be annihilated for his revenge upon Mordecai. He was going to seek the king's permission at the banquet for the execution of his enemy. He wanted him to hang high as a warning to any who would dare to defy the mighty Haman (14). **He was soon to discover that those who seek to harm a child of God are foolish indeed!** *Oh, love the LORD, all you his saints! for the LORD preserves the faithful, and fully repays the proud person* (Psalm 31:23).

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.*

(William Cowper)

From that time on they came no more on the Sabbath

The people had promised in their covenant, '*We will not neglect the house of our God*'; they also promised to support the Levites and all who were involved in maintaining the worship at the temple (10:35–39). Eliashib's sin in allowing Tobiah the Ammonite to live in the large temple storeroom had probably led to the neglect of this support. The Levites and singers had been obliged to work in the fields to support themselves. After getting rid of Tobiah, Nehemiah contended with the rulers, rebuking them for neglecting the house of God. The whole point of building the wall was for the protection of Jerusalem and the temple for the worship of God. Tithes and offerings were gathered into the storehouse and faithful men were appointed to organise the distribution to their fellow Levites (10–14). Sin makes us lose sight of our priorities, and this happened in the case of Eliashib.

Nehemiah was also shocked to discover that another solemn promise had been broken. The people had vowed, '*If the peoples of the land bring wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath*' (10:31). He again contended with the nobles, pointing out that it was an evil thing to profane the Sabbath and for this reason, God had in the past, brought disaster upon Jerusalem and its people (15–18). The Jewish Sabbath begins at sunset on the Friday evening. Nehemiah commanded that the gates of the city be closed for the duration of the Sabbath. He posted guards on the gates and warned the merchants attempting to enter the city on the Sabbath to stay away or to face his wrath. *From that time on they came no more on the Sabbath* (19–22).

God set aside the Sabbath for us to observe when he created the world (Genesis 2:3) and it is endorsed in the fourth commandment. but the Lord's Day (or Christian Sabbath) is not observed as being 'special' by many professing Christians. It should be a delight to those who delight in God (Isaiah 58:13–14). **This is not 'legalism'. If you despise the Lord's Day and find it irksome, could it be that you are worldly-minded or in a low spiritual state?**

Remember me, O my God

The people had solemnly pledged in their covenant to keep themselves from mixed marriages with the heathen. They had also invoked the curse of God upon themselves should they fail to observe his law (10:29–30). Nehemiah was shocked to discover that in his absence Jews had married women of Ashdod (a Philistine city), Ammon and Moab, and half of their children were unable to speak the language of Judah. He contended with those men who had broken God's law and pronounced them cursed. He struck some of them and pulled out their hair; the plucking out of hair was a sign of mourning and these men should have been mourning over their sin (Ezra 9:3). He made them renew their oath to keep their families from inter-marriage with the heathen (23–25). Nehemiah then reminded them that Solomon's sin in marrying pagan wives had led him into further sin, bringing disaster upon himself and Israel (26).

Nehemiah had another shock! A grandson of the high priest had married the daughter of Sanballat, the Samaritan who had led the opposition to the rebuilding of the wall. He drove this man, who had defiled the priestly office, from his presence (28). Many today would severely criticise Nehemiah as an intolerant and harsh man. We live in dangerous times when sin and rebellion against God tolerated as 'live and let live'. We are ill-qualified to pass judgment on a godly man of past times. Nehemiah boldly contended with the sinful leaders of Judah (11,17, 25) and with those who broke God's holy laws (20, 28). His determination to honour God overcame any fear of men.

What was Nehemiah's secret? He walked with God and was a great man of prayer. Notice the times he called upon the Lord as he set in motion his reforms. He prayed, '*Remember me, O my God*' (14,22, 29,31). He was aware of his own need to depend upon the Lord. **If we neglect prayer and the Word of God, we will find ourselves drifting just like Judah of old.**

For such a time as this

Mordecai sent another message to Esther, urging her not to remain silent, but to seek deliverance for the Jews. He warned her that she too would perish if the king's decree against the Jews were enforced. He was confident that relief and deliverance would '*arise for the Jews from another place*' (13–14). Esther knew that her situation was hopeless. In her desperation, she committed herself and her maids to fast for three days. She also called on the whole Jewish community in Shushan to join her in this fast. Esther had earlier joined the princes of Persia in their feasting (2:18). She now joined her persecuted people in their fasting. **In God's great strategy, Haman's plot was being used to bring his people to repentance and to set them praying!**

Mordecai had challenged Esther with the question, '*Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*' (14). Our sovereign God had indeed brought Esther to the kingdom for such a critical time! She said, '*I will go to the king which is against the law, and if I perish, I perish*' (16).

We live in a time of great and urgent spiritual need. The professing church has compromised the gospel of Christ. There is confusion in many evangelical churches and the gospel message has become obscured. We need to fast and pray! We need to show great courage and determination to stand firm against all the evil pressures that we encounter. May God be pleased to raise up godly men and women for such a time as this. Christian, the Lord has a work for you to do, '*for such a time as this*'.

*Facing a task unfinished,
That drives us to our knees,
A need that undiminished,
Rebukes our slothful ease,
We, who rejoice to know thee,
Renew before thy throne
The solemn pledge we owe thee
To go and make thee known.* (Frank Houghton)

There was great mourning among the Jews

Mordecai and the Jews throughout the empire were overwhelmed with anguish and distress when they heard the king's decree. *There was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing* (1–3). It seemed that God's cause throughout the world was threatened. Fasting in Scripture is associated with prayer, but prayer is not mentioned. Was God truly in control? – Yes, God was working all things together according to his purpose. to deliver his people from their enemies. God had ordained this crisis in order to humble Mordecai and the other backslidden Jewish people living in Babylonia, which had been absorbed into the Persian empire. **In the past, they had thought it very important to have all the material comforts and advantages that Babylon could offer. But now they clothed themselves in sackcloth, they mourned and fasted, they wept and wailed.**

Queen Esther however, knew nothing of this. She had not even heard of the decree. When she was told of Mordecai's distress, she had no idea what had caused it. She had to send a messenger to find out from him what was happening (4–5). Esther had become completely isolated from the people of God and was unaware of their trouble; she did not share their desperation or sorrow. When the messenger explained the situation to her, she simply said that she could not help. She sent Mordecai a message explaining that she had not been called into the king's presence for thirty days. To go there uninvited could attract the death penalty (11,16). She knew that Vashti's beauty and charm had not protected her from the king's wrath.

Some professing Christians have for one reason or another withdrawn from any active role in the fellowship of their own church. They are ignorant of the burdens and cares of their fellow believers. If you have become a 'drop out' I urge you to think again. No church is perfect, but if the Word of God is believed and preached, if the people love the Lord, you should be involved. Do not allow Satan to spoil your Christian life!

ESTHER

We do not know who God used to write the book of Esther. Some believe it to be Mordecai who was an eyewitness to the things recorded here (cp. 9:20). There is not a single reference to the name of God in the book of Esther, but his wonderful providence in preserving his people is clearly demonstrated. But for God's intervention, the Jews would have been destroyed. There would have been no return to Jerusalem for Ezra in 458 BC nor for Nehemiah in 445 BC.

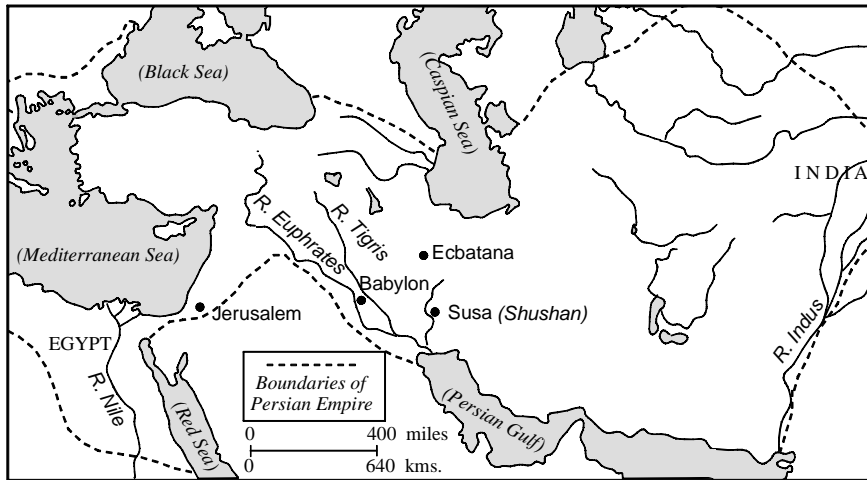
The events recorded in the book of Esther took place some thirty-four years before the return of Nehemiah to Jerusalem. Ahasuerus is generally recognised as King Xerxes 1 who ruled over the Persian empire from 485 to 464 BC. Vashti was deposed in the third year of Ahasuerus (1:3–4) and Esther became queen in the seventh year of his reign (2:16). Shushan (or Susa) was one of three capitals of the Persian empire (the other two being Babylon and Ecbatana).

Jerusalem fell to the besieging Babylonian army in 586 BC and its inhabitants were taken captive to Babylon. God promised the Jews that they would one day return to their own land. Though they were to build houses in Babylon and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce, they were to remember that their true home was Jerusalem (Jeremiah 29:5,10–14). They were not to put down such deep roots in Babylon that they forgot this (cp. Psalm 137:4–6).

Following the initial grief and anguish of captivity, the majority of the exiles gradually acquired a comfortable lifestyle and they forgot their homeland. Only a small minority returned after Cyrus issued his decree in 538 BC inviting the Jews to return to their homeland. They preferred life in exile to the hardships and deprivations involved in rebuilding God's work. The book of Esther is the story of God's care for these people, believers sunk into apathy and worldliness. It tells how God acted to protect them from their enemies and to win them back to a living dependence on himself.

Matthew Henry comments, ‘There were many who stayed behind, having not zeal enough for God’s house, and the holy land and city, to carry them through the difficulties of removing thither: these, one would think, should have been excluded the special protection of Providence, as unworthy of the name of Israelites; but God deals not with us according to our folly and weakness.’

The Persian Empire during the time of Esther (see Esther 1:1)



I am grateful to Pastor Stephen Rees (of Grace Baptist Church, Stockport) for his Bible study notes on Esther. He brought out valuable lessons from this book, and with his permission, I have incorporated them into my daily reading notes

Recommended commentary for Esther:

Iain M. Duguid: *Esther and Ruth* (published by P & R Publishing).

Haman sought to destroy all the Jews ... the people of Mordecai

Haman was a very wealthy man (cp. 5:11) but he was evil. He worked his way into the king’s favour, and was promoted to high office. He became the king’s confidant and was set over all the palace officials. By royal decree, Haman had everyone bowing to him, but Mordecai refused to do so (1–2). When the king’s servants asked him the reason for this, Mordecai told them that he was a Jew (4). He refused to render homage to Haman, not out of disrespect, but because Haman was an Agagite, a descendant of King Agag of the Amalekites who were ancient enemies of the Jews (cp. 1 Samuel 15:8). Mordecai at last made his stand but he had been very weak in exposing Esther to the evil and immorality of the royal court. **Believers are often inconsistent in their testimony. Does this apply to you? Seek to be consistent in all of your behaviour.**

Haman was filled with rage when he heard of Mordecai’s refusal to obey the king’s command. *Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus — the people of Mordecai* (5–6). Haman appears to have consulted astrologers when lots were cast to determine when the Jews should be annihilated (7). He slandered the Jews, telling the king that the Jews did not obey his laws (8); this type of tactic is often used by the enemies of God’s people. He then persuaded Ahasuerus to sanction his evil plans, promising to finance the slaughter of the Jews (9). Letters were sent throughout the kingdom proclaiming the king’s decree. A delighted Haman enjoyed a drink with the king, *but the city of Shushan was perplexed* (15).

Iain Duguid comments, ‘Haman’s enmity toward God’s people was merely the latest manifestation of Satan’s ongoing warfare against the people of God. The struggle for the hearts and minds of mankind that began in the garden continues on through time and space, and those who belong to the people of God will frequently feel the assaults of the Evil One ... against whom we need to be on our guard, protected by the whole armour of God (see Ephesians 6:10–20)’ – COMMENTARY, page 37.

The matter became known to Mordecai, who told queen Esther

It may have been through Esther's influence that Mordecai became an official at the palace (19; cp. 3:2). The apparent chance discovery by Mordecai of a plot against the king's life was also part of God's plan, which is seen as the story of Esther unfolds (21–23; cp. 6:1–3). *The matter became known to Mordecai, who told queen Esther* (22). The king had not rewarded Mordecai for saving his life but the Lord was to use this forgetfulness in the deliverance of the Jews from their enemies. A wicked king, a disobedient believer: can the Lord really be working out his purposes through the union of two such people as Ahasuerus and Esther? We know the answer.

Iain Duguid comments, 'Here is hope for all those who find themselves in difficult circumstances in the present because of their past sin and compromise. Here is hope for people who married a non-Christian husband or wife, even though they knew it was wrong. The person who ... has wasted a lifetime in pursuit of the wrong goals can discover that God is sovereign over those sinful choices and wasted opportunities. Perhaps it has brought us to where we are today so that we can serve him in a unique way. If so, that doesn't make those wrong decisions and sinful actions right. But it should cause us to give thanks to God that he is able to form beautiful pictures out of our smudged and stained efforts. Past failures do not write us out of a significant part in God's script for the future' (COMMENTARY, page 29).

*Thou knowest the way to bring me back,
My fallen spirit to restore;
O for thy love and mercy's sake
Forgive, and bid me sin no more;
The ruins of my soul repair
And make my heart a house of prayer.* (Charles Wesley)

There is a way back to God from the dark paths of sin! God over-ruled the sins of his people and preserved them. Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, came from heaven and his human descent came through the Jews, who were threatened with destruction at that time.

But Queen Vashti refused

Ahasuerus reigned over a vast empire (1; – see map). According to the historian, Herodotus, he held a great assembly of his princes and nobles at Shushan (Susa) to plan war against Greece. The feast and the gathering of all his officials may refer to the same event (3). Ahasuerus proudly showed off his enormous wealth and *the splendour of his excellent majesty* (4–6). There was a feast for all those who had gathered; each man could do according to his pleasure (8). Queen Vashti also held a feast for the wives of the king's guests (9).

Ahasuerus had many wives, but Vashti was his queen and she was renowned for her beauty. The king, *merry with wine*, decided to parade his queen. (10–11). Iain Duguid comments, 'To command his wife to appear dressed up in her royal finery for the enjoyment of a crowd of drunken men was to treat her as a doll, a mere object who existed for the king's pleasure, and to show off his power' (COMMENTARY, page 10). Strong drink has led to the breakdown of many a marriage and when a man is possessed by alcohol, he does not behave sensibly or reasonably. **Scripture is full of warnings about the peril of strong drink** (eg. Proverbs 20:1; 21:17; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Peter 4:3).

But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command (12). Ahasuerus was furious when Vashti defied him. His advisors warned him that if she were allowed to get away with this act of defiance, her example would encourage women throughout the realm to despise their husbands. The king acted swiftly. Vashti must be divorced and disgraced, and a successor found. Scripture instructs wives to submit to their husbands, but the husband who truly loves his wife behaves honourably towards her and would never treat her as Ahasuerus treated Vashti (cp. Ephesians 5:22–25; 1 Peter 3:1–7).

God was working out his purpose, however. He controls 'chance' events, the queen's determined stubbornness, the king's capricious anger; the counsellors' careful flattery. All were under the sovereign hand of God.

Esther also was taken to the king's palace

Ahasuerus may have been filled with regret when he remembered Vashti in his sober and quiet moments (1), but he could not rescind his decree (1:19). His officials advised him to have the most beautiful women from all the provinces of the kingdom brought to the palace and to choose a queen from their number. Esther, an orphan, was the adopted daughter of her cousin, Mordecai (who was old enough to be her father). They must have been alarmed and fearful at the king's decree, for Esther was a very beautiful woman. – *Esther also was taken to the king's palace* (8).

We must be clear, Mordecai should never have allowed this to happen. He should have been prepared to die rather than hand his daughter over to Ahasuerus' harem (though in fact there is no suggestion in the passage that this round-up was anything but voluntary). God's law warned against intermarriage with the heathen (eg. Deuteronomy 7:3; cp. Ezra 9:10–12, Nehemiah 10:29–30). Not only that, but the terms of this 'marriage' were the most degrading possible. Esther must submit herself to the lust of the king for a single night. If she happened to please him, she might become his queen. If not, she must take a lonely place among the women of the royal harem, never to know the joys of a loving marriage relationship or family life. In either case Mordecai was allowing her to enter an utterly ungodly society. How could she keep the sabbath in that household? How could she refuse to bow before the king's pagan gods? How could she maintain any spiritual life cut off from the people of God? How could she bring up her children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?

From every point of view, Mordecai's action seems bewildering. How could a loving father choose to submit his daughter to the whims of a man like Ahasuerus? Ancient historians give us a picture of Ahasuerus as a brutal man who treated the various women in his life with appalling cruelty. Mordecai's actions were misguided but God graciously brought good out of evil.

Esther had not revealed her people or kindred

Mordecai and Esther had compromised their faith by opting for comfort and prosperity, rather than the honour of God. Mordecai may have believed he was 'doing his best' for the daughter he loved. He wanted her to be surrounded by wealth and comfort more than that she should live surrounded by godly influences. The opportunity was too good to miss! **Worldly concerns lead to worldly choices which then bring problems and heartache to many a believer (cp. 1 Timothy 6:8–10).**

Furthermore, Esther had to accept the lifestyle of the palace. She accepted the beauty treatments, but more disturbing, she ate the special foods provided by Hegai (9–12; 'her allowance' in verse 9 refers to her food). The law of God prohibited Jewish people from eating any food not declared to be 'clean'. In similar circumstances, Daniel and his friends refused to eat the food provided for them in the royal palace (Daniel 1:3–16). Esther did not allow such 'petty scruples' to hinder her ambition to become queen. Esther was favoured and *the king loved Esther ... and made her queen* (17). The happy monarch gave a feast in honour of Esther and distributed gifts (18).

The king and his entourage were not aware that Esther was Jewish or that Mordecai was her close relative. *Esther had not revealed her people or kindred.* She hid the fact that she was one of God's people as instructed by Mordecai (10, 20). Worldly advantages, it seemed, had become more important to them than upholding God's name and honour. This is still a problem for many today. We hide our faith and do not confess Christ because of the fear of men. **Are you ashamed to own your Lord?**

*I'm not ashamed to own my Lord,
Or to defend his cause;
Maintain the honour of his Word,
The glory of his cross.*

(Isaac Watts)