

ESTHER

STRENGTH FOR DANGEROUS

TIMES

by

HARRIS LANGFORD

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But now, this is what The Lord says... he
who created you, O Jacob, he who
formed you, O Israel: Fear not, for I
have redeemed you; I have called you
by name; you are mine. When you pass
through the waters, I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you. When you
walk through the fire, you will not be
burned; the flames will not set you
ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the
Holy One of Israel, your Savior....

Isaiah 43:1-3

By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked
this way comes.

Macbeth, Act 4, Scene 1

To our daughter Sharon who has always brought us joy. Thank you, Dear. May you be ready as was Esther for such a time as this.

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PROLOGUE

This volume, the men and women whom you will meet, and the study work may be among the most unusual you have encountered. This is the historical account and examination of a turning point in history, a slice of life that has actually dropped out of time and memory. Yet, it is every bit as real as this morning's news.

Esther was the wife of a key player on the world stage, Persian king Xerxes the Great. How she arrived at her position, the background of events surrounding what appeared to be a spur-of-the-moment refusal by her predecessor to agree to a royal order, and her action in single-handedly preventing the genocide of an entire people...this is the stuff of a movie.

In your examination of the book of Esther in God's Word you'll find a troubled marriage, lost wars, a close family relationship, palace intrigue, murderous plots, lying and a classic "sting" operation that turned the tables on a lethal adversary. And for your pleasure, you'll discover the sort of real-life ending which makes you grateful for having begun your work in the first place!

The historical events you are going to encounter, the background information...it's all in the history books. You may not have discovered these before, but if you examine the references you'll see that the Bible and its people are set within the context of true life. And God's directions are as reliable as ever for you and the ones you love most.

Thank you, my readers, for your time and interest.

To Lieutenant Colonel Homer Lewis, Jr., thank you for reading this manuscript carefully to keep me straight. To Ida Oakes, Sharon Loomis and my brother Bruce, thank you for your prayer and encouragement to finish this book in the midst of other duties on behalf of our remarkable nation. And to Kay, my wife of forty-five years, thank you for helping me to stay focused on the task at hand. You always "knew that I could." If our work pleases the Lord of Heaven and Earth, perhaps He will use it to provide strength in these dangerous times.

Harris Langford

Newport News, Virginia, February 2014

STRENGTH FOR DANGEROUS TIMES

A Study of the Book of Esther

Chapter 1 [Esther 1:1-15] *Refusal*

Xerxes, king of the Persian empire, returns from war in a bad mood, becomes furious at his wife the queen and decides to get rid of her. His plans are interrupted by more war.

Chapter 2 [Esther 1:16-22] *Sentence*

The king and his advisors judge and sentence his wife. Vashti disappears from public view. Leaders of Persia worry about the impact on the Persian social and political order of her illegal action. The emperor is urged to get another wife—one who will agree with him.

Chapter 3 [Esther 2:1-18] *Search*

Leaders of the empire launch a massive dragnet to find a new wife for Xerxes. Through bitter competition with other gorgeous women Esther, a young and faithful Hebrew, emerges as his new wife and second most powerful individual in the empire. She has no idea of what will be demanded of her by God.

Chapter 4 [Esther 2:19-23] *Conspiracy*

Esther's father discovers a plot to assassinate the emperor. Persian justice is swift, brutal and completely effective; he has very little time to act. He seeks an audience with the queen, informs her of the plot, and authorities move to stop it. The perpetrators, among the emperor's highest-ranking security specialists, are executed.

Chapter 5 [Esther 3:1-15] *Insult*

Mordecai, a leader in Persia, has an enemy who will stop at nothing to kill him and all of his people. The Jews are framed in such a clever manner that the king, Xerxes, issues an order to exterminate them. Unknown to him, this sweeping contract would also include his new wife. Haman acting in the name of the emperor sends the murder warrant throughout the empire, triggering a process that takes on a lethal life of its own.

Chapter 6 [Esther 4: 1-17] *Disaster*

Amid mass grieving at the impending slaughter of his people, Mordecai gains an audience with his daughter, the queen. She is the only one who can prevent the oncoming disaster. But to do so may well come at the price of her own life. Esther appears before the king, then sets the stage for her enemy's downfall as she meets with Mordecai to seek God's mercy and help.

Chapter 7 [Esther 5:1-14] *Invitation*

Esther activates her plan, God's plan, for a "sting" operation that she trusts will destroy the enemy of her people. She invites the emperor and his new second-in-command to a dinner. Haman is overstuffed with pride at this signal honor but still has time to fly into a rage at Mordecai's refusal to be cowed by his power and presence. He is mollified somewhat when he gets from his wife a grisly plan for revenge.

Chapter 8 [Esther 6:1 - 14] *Insomnia*

Xerxes has insomnia and hopes to be bored to sleep by reading the empire's political records. Instead, he discovers how Mordecai saved him from being murdered, and the king rewards him. Not realizing the depth of Haman's hatred for Mordecai, the king orders him to oversee the royal honors for Esther's father. Haman now can hardly manage his embarrassment and hatred at the same time. He receives a dreadful omen.

Chapter 9 [Esther 7:1 - 10] *Trapped*

In his bubble of pride and self-deception, Haman arrives at Esther's dinner and steps perfectly into the trap she has laid for him. The queen humbles herself before her husband and describes in detail the impending slaughter of an entire race of Persia's best citizens. Once he has heard of his advisor's treasonous plot Xerxes can barely suppress apoplexy and departs the room for several moments. When he returns Haman appears to be sexually assaulting the queen. In an instant he orders the execution of the man on the very gallows Haman had intended for Mordecai.

Chapter 10 [Esther 8:1- 17] *New Orders*

After hastily forming a solution to the looming disaster that would consume his own wife along with every other Jew in the empire, Xerxes and Esther craft an approach to Haman's death order, now thundering under its own power toward activation. The plan provides Jews across the land with additional legal cover for heavily arming themselves and attacking their enemies. Then the entire ruling class sits back, holding its collective breath.

Chapter 11 [Esther 9:1- 10:3] *Triumph*

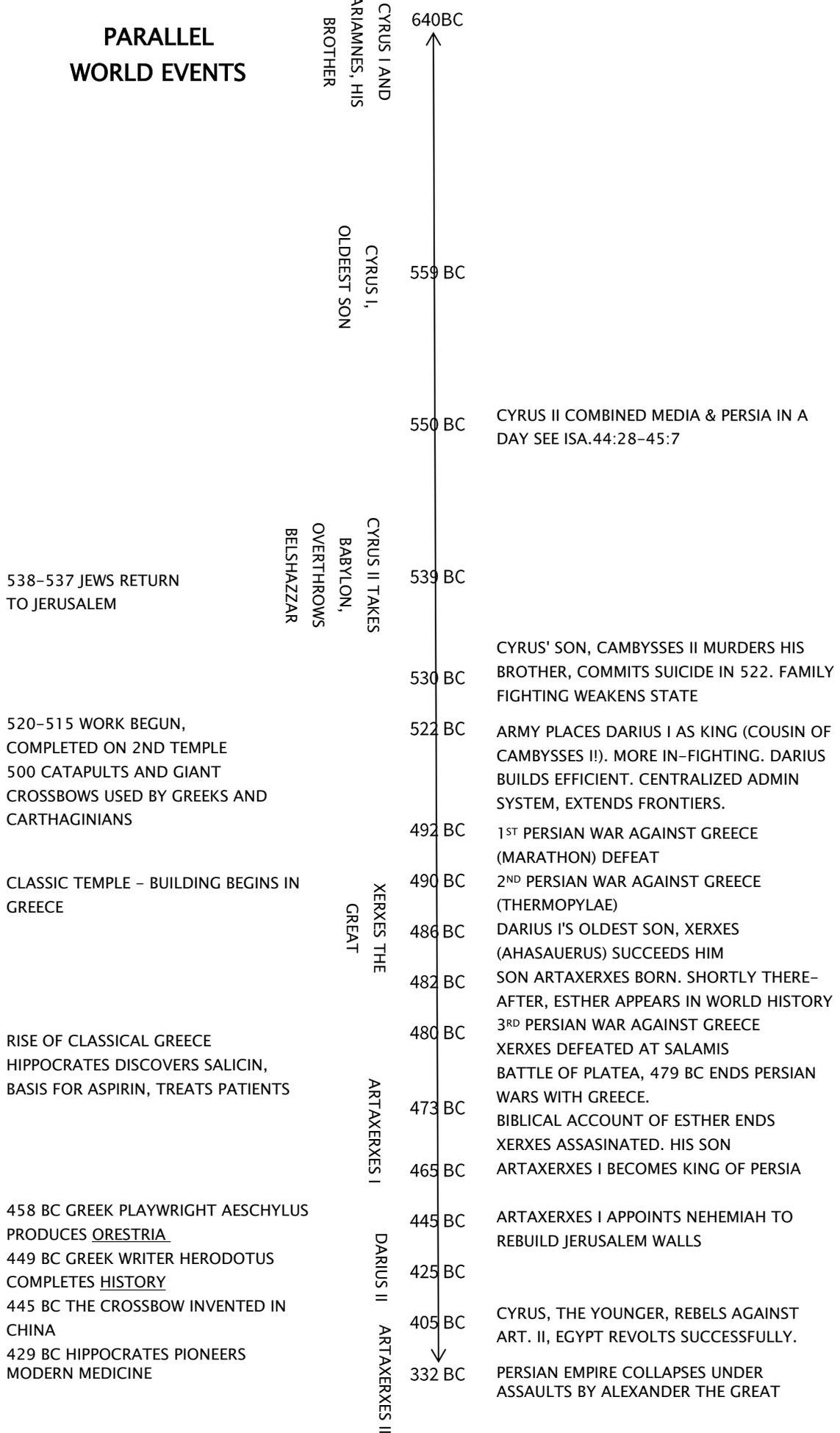
The Jews defend themselves against their enemies in widespread conflicts, in the process refusing all opportunities to grab millions of dollars' worth of their enemies' property. Haman's entire family is obliterated. The Jews celebrate a holiday they name Purim. Esther's and Mordecai's influence in politics is reaffirmed. Mordecai becomes second in authority to Xerxes himself. During this period, Esther influences her step-son, Artaxerxes 1, who ordered Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem with more Jews to rebuild the city walls. The queen's influence was incalculable and, outside of these recorded events, invisible. Her father remained a righteous leader of Persia.

Epilogue *In the End...*

Xerxes the Great is assassinated by a bodyguard. Esther and her father disappear into the mists of history, leaving behind them a vital task well-done. They have further prepared the way for a King they would never meet in this life; they have been His instruments for protecting those Jews who would never return to Jerusalem. When He arrived, Jesus Christ found there exactly that assortment of peoples from old Babylon and Persia who were supposed to be present. His great plan continued flawlessly.

PARALLEL WORLD EVENTS

PERSIAN TIMELINE



INTRODUCTION

Fear and Fury of a Queen

The Imperial Palace, Susa, Persia, 482 B.C.

Down the hallway fled seven men who, in any other situation, were seen striding confidently into buildings and rooms to deliver royal orders. Ordinarily, their very presence could put the fear of the gods into even powerful, lethal men. But not this time.

They literally ran from the presence of the tall and beautiful woman. Only seconds before, she had cut into their message with a venomous look, slicing their words to hesitant phrases. Vashti watched the seven vanish from sight down the long corridor, their footsteps muffled by colorful hangings and statuary lining the passageway. Inside, the regal woman felt fear make its way up her spine like a cold worm.

Their high, testy voices had delivered her husband's message, the words of Xerxes the Great: "The king hosts his loyal servants, his leaders, his generals at a banquet this night. He commands the presence of the Queen, his wife, that these nobles may be impressed by her beauty and amazed at his wisdom in selecting such a woman for marriage."

Wretched fools, she thought.

For reasons she could not identify, all the years of frustrations, failed love, her husband's infidelities and a sadness compounded by her own affairs as well, her most recent mortification at his escapade in Greece and, finally, his foul disposition after having been defeated in that small and spiteful little land...all of this bubbled together now in a stew of fury. She quickly assigned the blame to his boorish order tossed before her like so much raw meat.

The seven eunuch servants of Xerxes first realized that things were not going according to plan when the Queen's voice tightened in the single word, "Oh?" as they began to issue their instructions. Her lovely nose flared, her eyes narrowed; she became dangerous. Her words were diamond-hard and cold with anger.

"You seven tell my husband, the King, that I say, 'No! I will not appear. I will not be examined like property by a hoard of overfed, drunken fools. I will not be shamed again!'"

Her voice settled to a threatening whisper. "You seven get out of here and tell him what I said. And you remember that I am the Queen. I am not without the power to turn your days to misery if I so desire."

Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas all felt the heat of royal rage and scurried from her presence.

Vashti was overcome by a strange alloy of determination and fear of the consequences for her action. She gestured to her attendants to leave her alone, and then she moved slowly to one of her balconies overlooking an inner garden of the palace in Susa. The light of the setting sun bathed the vast structure in gold and tinged the leaves and flowers below her with a tawny softness. Birds chirped, and mellow sounds of flowing water rose to her from the small canals feeding the gardens, but it all was lost upon the woman caught in her memories.

She knew her history from the royal instructors. More than a century before, her husband's ancestor, Cyrus II, had accomplished the impossible in this land of fractious people who often preferred fighting to eating and sleeping. In one day, by his administrative skills, raw personal aura, and cagey military preparations, Cyrus had welded together the kingdoms of Media¹ and Persia. That powerful man had rolled over Babylon as if it were a camel hump on the highway, absorbing the once-terrifying kingdom and executing its odd little king, Belshazzar.

Vashti had for years been intrigued by accounts of Belshazzar having seen an omen of these events. The Jews across the kingdom told stories of a great banquet at which there appeared a disembodied hand writing upon a wall before the astonished revelers. It scrawled the words,² "Mene, mene, tekel upharsin." ["You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting."]

Belshazzar, she remembered, turned deathly pale and the banquet came to an early end. Shortly thereafter, Babylon had ceased to exist.

Her fear and confusion dissolved into a bitter laugh as she imagined the effect of the same thing happening in her husband's banquet hall two blocks away. She envisioned the gradual silence as bleary-eyed lords and generals realized there was no body attached to that hand. They were so superstitious; they would be just like that crowd with Belshazzar.

She mused about Cyrus II's successors. She had always believed that most rulers had one ugly and usually terminal flaw in addition, of course, to their pompous notions of themselves. They never trained anyone to succeed them. To Vashti this was abject folly. It guaranteed family in-fighting and usually produced idiot kings who were the last thing any people needed if they were to be capably led.

Her husband's family, the Achaemenid dynasty, was a prime example. Less than a century before her own time, Cyrus II's son, Cambyses II, murdered his brother Smerdis in a hurried effort to take over his father's kingdom. Cambyses' reputation for sadism lingered to her own day. Through his utter incompetence, he lost a 50,000-man army trying to subjugate Egypt. In a rage, he kicked to death his sister-wife, Roxana, shot to death his closest attendant's son just to prove his skill as an archer, and buried alive twelve of his regional administrators because he had a headache.³

Persia considered his suicide in 522 a gift from the gods. That event, however, left the entire family fighting like badgers for positions of power. Only the army's intervention had saved the land from extinction. The generals placed Darius I on the throne; their choice proved to be a wise one. Though he was a cousin of that village idiot Cambyses, this one had brains and the skills to run a country.

From her studies, Vashti recalled that Darius had carved out governmental inefficiency as if he were a butcher slicing meat. It was he who had devised the remarkable centralized system of territorial administration that allowed her own husband, Xerxes, to appear effective as a leader.

Still, she knew down deep what potential for disaster lurked in her husband's administrative inability, selfishness, pride, and sexual excesses.

Xerxes the Great, he was called. He was a big man and supposedly the handsomest male in the land. His reputation as a lover brought a sour taste to the queen's mouth. He was too good for too many women. Though he looked every inch the part of a military leader, Vashti knew much of this was pure showmanship. She feared her husband; she could not recall when she had respected him.

Once more she faced the fact that beneath his impressive surface lay serious personal flaws which, if indulged, would bring this vast empire to its knees. The thought depressed her beyond words.

And then their present agonies had begun, growing out of the trade wars with that wretched little gaggle of city-states called Greece. Vashti's fingers curled, her nails biting into her whitened palms in a silent display of her inner fury.

Twenty years before, in 500 B.C., Darius lashed out at the Ionian Greek cities, abetted by Athens and Eritrea that had revolted under his despotism. In 492 he launched an expeditionary force to smash the city-states and annex Greece itself to the empire. For his efforts, he lost his entire massive naval fleet in a storm; he and the Greeks had become the first states in history to use a combination of naval and land forces in combat.⁴ Undaunted by his awful military decisions and ghastly losses, Darius tried again the following year. There were several small victories. Then a Greek general, Miltiades, broke the back of Persia's forces at the battle of Marathon.

"Kings and fools never learn," she said in a gravelly voice to the empty room. Darius was planning his third assault on Greece when he died in 486. His son, her husband Xerxes, followed his father's losing ways. Last year, 483, he mounted another assault on Greece and was in the process of being made a public fool by those nasty people who simply would not go away somewhere and die. His armies had overrun their foes at times, but the price of such victories was too high for his generals to sustain. The Greeks were experts in small unit tactics specializing in hit-and-run strikes. They harassed Xerxes' larger units from behind and at night with a speed that the Persians could not match. When his armies won, it was because the Greeks had erred and simply got themselves caught.

News from the war front was uniformly bad now, and he was in an ugly mood much of the time. Once more the queen felt a dark cloud of foreboding and uncertainty gathering about her.

Readers will note the periodic insertion of *italicized text* within each of the following chapters. These sections are placed there to provide a description of what might have been going through the minds of the people involved, and as descriptions of actual geographical, historical and weather phenomena. These sections are not taken from the Bible text of Esther and are certainly not intended to be viewed that way.

Chapter 1

Refusal

[Esther 1:1-15]

For Persians, 486 B.C. was not a good year. The empire was neck-deep in an ugly guerrilla war with Greece when Persia's talented but despotic king Darius I died. Leadership shifted to his son, Xerxes, a remarkably large, attractive man with an unstable personality and very few administrative skills.

The son inherited his father's war, a protracted, brutal conflict that ebbed and flowed between Persian success with overwhelming power and the Greeks' advantage with small unit tactics. Finally, Persia slammed through Athens' defenses with raw force. Xerxes, in the tradition of Oriental kings, had taken his queen, Vashti, with him to the war front. Likewise, in traditional fashion, he had also carried on several affairs while in Greece, managing in the process to thoroughly embarrass his queen. This would have consequences he never imagined, repercussions that would extend far beyond his own lifetime.

In a move to shore up morale within Persia and in his military, in 483 B.C. Xerxes hosted a strategy and management seminar of heroic proportions. For half a year the event ground on, filled with displays of Persia's vast wealth and military might. During it all, news from Greece was not encouraging to the king. However, he pressed on in his determination that, even if his international policies were woefully inadequate, at least the glitter of the home front might conceal some of that to his staff and military. Guests came from the extremities of the empire, from Egypt in the west to India in the east. They journeyed from 127 provinces under Persian control. Military leaders and strategists, nobles, diplomats, administrators, hardened combat troops, wise officials, and fawning sycophants of the professional ruling class. All received invitations to the black-and-white marble palace¹ in the foothill city of Susa.

This stunning residence was a site of ancient and modern beauty. Its great banquet hall spread over 100,000 square feet. Nine color schemes of blue, white, purple and gold dominated the tapestries and curtains. Seventy-two columns supported the great hall's roof, thirteen of which remain standing today. These are considered among the most nearly perfect works of mankind in their symmetry, style and composition.² In Persian construction, the overall effect of gathering, design, and fit in everything they did made a profound impression.

Xerxes the Great ended this momentous gathering with a banquet of intimidating size and impressiveness. He was a powerful man, and he had no reservations about showing it. There were some present who had also seen another side of this king. He was controlled by cyclonic emotions, and when he gave in to them, he was brutal.³ They recalled the story of the father whose family had given up four sons to the king's wartime draft. When his last son was also ordered into service, the father sent a desperate plea to the king to cancel the orders and permit his son to remain at home to care for the family. In an act of vengeful petulance, Xerxes directed that the remaining son be cut in two. Half of the body then was dumped on each side of the highway down which the troops marched on their way to far-off Greece.⁴

Another demonstration of his bizarre character was seen during combat with Greece when Xerxes lost a flotilla of ships trying to make passage through the Dardanelles [Greeks called it the Hellespont] during a storm. In a rage, he attempted to force the sea to be calm by linking plates of iron over the water. Those who worked under him wondered if he had lost his mind completely.

In contrast with Xerxes' irrational behavior, consider one aspect of God's nature, His careful and steady control. He is never capricious, petty, heartless or vicious. Throughout the Bible He is characterized by mercy balanced with justice [Genesis 18:16-33, Abraham's plea to God on behalf of Sodom and God's response]. His is a governed approach to life that reflects a great heart for men and women, our relationships with Him and with each other [Exodus 20:2-17, the commandments that govern all of life]. And He is deeply kind to humans, especially to those in great need or in complicated circumstances [Mark 5:21-24, 35-43, the return to life of an official's child; and 5:25-34, His healing of an anonymous woman's life-draining hemorrhage].

When someone goes to the Lord God, that man or woman can be open, embarrassed, distressed, happy, hesitant, testy, weepy or undone altogether. His response is always gracious, attentive and directed at that person as if he or she were the only one on earth. One example is God's response to Elijah's terror at having a contract on his life put out by Queen Jezebel. [1 Kings 19:1-18] God calmed the man and gave him new instructions. Another illustration is Jesus' order in Matthew 11:28 to, "...come to me all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest."

We must not take our cues about God from those who know Him least or not at all. Develop your attitude about Him and actions toward Him on the basis of His conduct and proven, written record in the Bible. "Rumor control" does you no favors in the serious task of navigating your way through the risks, rocks and threats of everyday life.

Xerxes' subjects had no such protection. They came and watched, partied and listened, always with the knowledge that there was that other menacing side to the king and that life could be disastrously short if he were not kept smiling up on his massive golden throne.

At this point, a series of events occurred that the king had never foreseen. Obviously, he exercised very poor judgment in what he did next and, as is often the case at such times, common sense went out the window. On day seven of the majestic bash the king and everyone in the great hall were drunk [Esther 1:8, 10]. Not falling-down drunk; instead, they were in that dangerous flatland of fog where rational thinking is impossible and emotions rage unrestrained.

It was then that Xerxes decided to show off the queen and his wife, Vashti, a woman of remarkable beauty. He sent an order by his messengers that she must appear wearing her crown, for he wanted to display her beauty to his guests. She, however, refused his command.

For a long time, his order and Vashti's reaction to it have puzzled Christians. On the face of it, given our extreme interest in physical appearance and what seems to be little more than a petty response by the queen, the whole issue smacks of the "mountain out of the molehill" phenomenon. History has buried most of what we'd like to know. However, we can make some truthful inferences based on what we do know about the king's conduct in Greece and Vashti's position in her nation.

Vashti had given her own celebration for the Persian women. Obviously, in that event she was viewed as a leader in her own right. And in Oriental lands, an emperor's wife frequently had a wide following among the people—particularly when she performed deeds of kindness for her subjects. There was no reason why this attitude would not apply to Vashti, especially in view of the king's advisors' deep concern about popular reaction to her refusal to obey his order—her husband's order, personally delivered to her by his seven eunuch messengers. [Esther 1:10-11] Technically, Xerxes had the right to order her to display herself before his guests; but his was an act of great stupidity and a public insult to her. It was completely unnecessary.

Today we live in a time of great advancements in virtually every field of knowledge, yet our society is also lathered with moral bankruptcy and social excess. In the midst of this, we are still responsible to the revealed standards of God. Christians are made constantly aware that, as James observed [James 3:1] and God made plain in Hebrews [Hebrews 13:17], leading and following are serious actions. Leaders must first take care of their

own people, not one's self. As a follower, your responsibility is to get the job done obediently and efficiently without generating trouble for those whom God has sent to lead.

Several years ago as I was reading British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's first book about her years in government, I was struck by a remark she made about her father. She wrote, "My father was a man of principle. Yet, in the practice of those principles, he did not make others' lives miserable." Good advice for leaders.

Xerxes had virtually no principles, and he made a great many lives miserable. He was ruled by his emotions.

God is only faintly concerned about our emotions, and He is not at all interested in whether we "feel" like doing something. He insists on clearheaded leaders and determined, biblically-informed followers.

So, how are you doing in this regard? Are you a man or woman of God's pattern, or do your actions and decisions bring trouble and heartache to those around you and those who depend upon you?

Another aspect of Xerxes' problem was that he had several affairs, one with a Greek general's wife, during his latest expedition to that land. It proved to be an enormous embarrassment to his wife. Although we will never know exactly what prompted Vashti's refusal to obey her husband's order, it may be simply that she was still angry with Xerxes.

There is no way to determine if he wanted her to appear nude, wearing only her crown, partially dressed, or to do something else that would have been equally degrading. These are immaterial to the historical account in Esther as it also is to non-biblical history. The fact is, Vashti made a decision, and she knew that the consequences could be fatal.

The queen was certainly not a follower of Jehovah; all evidence points to the entire line of the Achemenids following the teachings of Zoroastrianism. Still, even in an unbeliever, there is an interesting point to be made here. The Bible is replete with examples of unbelievers who, when confronted with some offense, begged for relief, whined, complained about their lot in life, and in general presented a disgusting picture of themselves as men and women. But there is no sign that Vashti did so.

Many people, including a host of Christians who should know better, do things or make choices that violate some law. It may be school rules, company standards, civil or criminal law, or even God's law. Then they want to make a great moral or spiritual issue about it in an effort to avoid the consequences of their actions.

From the perspective of God, however, escape from accountability is not that simple. The Bible teaches that God's great mercy and kindness is—in some strange fashion—mixed with the reality of consequences. David is a perfect example. He had sex with a beautiful neighbor, Bathsheba, who was also the wife of one of his finest brigade commanders, a general named Uriah. In order to conceal her pregnancy and what he had done, David craftily engineered Uriah's death when the officer unknowingly did not cooperate with the king's ruse. David murdered him by sending him into combat, then recalling all of his supporting troops, leaving the general alone and vulnerable to Ammonite infantry that killed him instantly. The whole account is graphically described in 2 Samuel 11:1-17.

David avoided the matter for a year until God sent the prophet Nathan to headline it for the king. To his credit, David took responsibility for what he had done. Still, God did not remove the consequences of his actions, and in most cases neither will He do so for you and me. David was ridiculed across the nation and his and Bathsheba's infant son died shortly after birth. The consequences of his actions brought disaster within his own family in later years.

Actions have consequences. As Christians, you and I have to expect this reality. Vashti made a decision and, as far as we know, never whined or complained about the consequences of her choice.

How is it with you?

What have you done deliberately that has brought you hardship? Are you now trying to justify yourself and avoid the penalties you always knew were there? That's dishonorable. It is weak and an insult to God. A man or woman appears whiney and childish. God steadfastly insists that you and I face the results of choices we have made.

If you are a Christian, make the choices Christ directs for you. If you suffer for it, keep in mind that He said this was going to happen. [John 15:18-21] If you knowingly broke a rule or law, there is a price to be paid. Think of it this way: one of God's unwritten laws is, 'There is no place in life for a certain number of awful decisions that will be pain-free.' If you have violated a law or a standard, pay the price willingly. Don't twist and turn or threaten to sue someone and try to avoid it.

Many of us seem to believe that, in the first part of our lives, we can live as if we are unguided missiles, aimed at nothing and exploding all along the way. Then, we think that at point X we can get serious and God will be there ready to wipe out all of what we have done along with the results.

Yes, Christ does bring forgiveness for our sin, and the Holy Spirit does change our lives. That does not alter the fact that where you are now depends heavily upon choices you have made in the past. Therefore, make wise choices under Christ's direction and show your children how to do the same.

Let's be personal. Are you thinking through each day how best to use your time? Are you skilled at choosing friends, or are your closest acquaintances just walking disasters, always in trouble, and spreading grief wherever they and you go? How about those whom you date? Are they people for whom you must make excuses because their conduct is wretched or dangerous? Or are they ones we call the "high graders?" "High grade" is a type of gold that requires little refining because it is of such good quality. In the old West, those who found it on their claims were known as "high graders" because what they had discovered was the best ore.

How about your marriage? Did you choose well? Are you choosing well? Or did you reach out in hopeful love, only to grasp lasting grief? How prepared are you for life and its demands? We need clear heads, sharp eyes and determination to make godly decisions. Jesus Christ, the Lord God, certainly provides those to all men and women who respond in faith and serve Him. But, there's another side to this picture, just as there was to Xerxes' personality. Without Christ, a man or woman may enjoy some apparent successes. Over the course of their lives, however, they will know broken trust, heartache and wasted years. And at the end, there is no way to make up for all they have squandered.

Xerxes, great ruler that he was, in a moment of stupidity, weakness and lack of self-control made a decision that would lead to the near genocide of some of his empire's best people, the Jews.

It didn't seem as if it were all that important when the seven messengers brought back Queen Vashti's answer to the king's order. She had refused. The king flew into a rage as they had seen him do so often before.

Perhaps Xerxes the Great still had a place in his heart for his queen. Or he may have begun to realize that he must tread carefully since his wife had her own following across the empire. Whatever the case, he put to his advisors the weight of a decision about her punishment. He asked the men of his inner governing circle what should be the price she would pay for refusing to obey him.

READER'S PROBE 1

Consider This From Chapter 1:1-13

1. Frequently we think the Bible is difficult to understand because we view its characters as unreal rather than normal people. So, let's deal with that first. With the people below, what typical human problems can you identify?

Xerxes _____

Vashti _____

Administrative Advisors _____

2. What technique employed by God in verses 1-3 takes this account out of the realm of legends and fairy tales? _____

3. If Vashti's rationale for refusing to go along with her husband's order was motivated at least in part by her resentment at his affairs and her embarrassment, why would she pick this time to refuse his order? _____

4. You and I are not the same people as those in the historical record of Esther. But God's means of directing us are the same across the ages. Beginning with the most important of all, what are three means by which He directs us in our decisions and actions?

Psalms 119:105 _____

Proverbs 12:15 _____

James 1:22 _____

[In the Proverbs reference keep in mind that your real friends and reliable advisors are those who will tell you what you need to hear, not merely what you want to hear.]

5. What in the Bible text indicates that Xerxes, though wealthy and great, was a problem waiting to explode?
6. Name three wealthy, powerful, attractive or talented men or women who have not allowed any one of these assets to change their natures to the unpleasant.

.....
Name

.....
Possession

.....

.....

Name	Possession
..... Name Possession

Are you personally acquainted with these people? Then pray for them regularly and thank God for them.

7. Does possessing power, money or influence prove that God is honoring one's family, church or business?
..... Why do you believe it means this?

What do the following glimpses into the mind of God tell you about possible effects of money and power?

Proverbs 15:27 _____

Ecclesiastes 5:10 _____

1 Timothy 6:9-10 _____

8. What means does God provide for balancing the use of all power and money?

Romans 12:9-10 _____

Romans 12:16b and c _____

1 Peter 2:13-17 _____

2 Timothy 1:7 _____

Galatians 5:22-23 [What person provides what qualities?] _____

9. Consider yourself. Regardless of your age, what sort of power or influence do you have?

Appearance _____

Speech _____

Reputation _____

Ideas _____

Knowledge _____

Intellectual Ability _____

Money _____

10. Based on what you have read in Chapter 1 and your study so far, what specific change[s] will you make in the use of the above? "I'll try to do better," is no good. It's too easy and it doesn't nail you down to any commitment. Please be specific.

11. From your own experience, provide an account of someone influential who was merciless when he or she could have been helpful to another. _____

Now describe someone who showed real mercy and the results of their action.

Is it possible to allow someone whom you care about [child, spouse, friend, etc.] to experience unpleasant consequences of their actions and still love them?

Let's be more specific: can a parent who really loves a daughter allow that child to go through painful consequences of wrong actions without that parent trying to remove those consequences? _____

Consider Genesis 4:1-16. What happened here? _____

12. Following the principle that leaders must take care of their people first, use this checklist to evaluate yourself for how you treat and take care of others. Give two responses for each person or group, and begin each answer with 'I' to describe what you do in that relationship.

Parents	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
Brother/	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sister	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friends	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teammates	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
Your Spouse	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
Employer	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teacher	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
Coach	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jesus Christ	I	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I	<input type="checkbox"/>

13. Measure each statement you've made by Christ's remark in Matthew 25:21. In the blocks at the end of each sentence check the statements about which Jesus would say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant...." Be honest; if you have truly done commendably recognize it. If you have not, then you know what you have to improve.

14. In what ways might you be breaking rules or laws at or in the following?

Your child[ren]'s school _____

Your school or work _____

Your vehicle _____

Your finances _____

Your spiritual life _____

Your family relationship _____

Your belief about a political issue _____

15. Describe an event in national leadership in which the consequences of someone's act far outstripped what anyone expected _____

16. What guidance does 1 Samuel 8 provide for citizens of our nation in our privilege of selecting leaders? Look deeper than kings and queens. What is the principle involved?

All right, let's move on. In the next chapter events in the historical account get really stormy.