

Esther 1 and 2

Aim of lesson

To show how Esther, a humble Jewess, became Queen of Persia, and that those who seek the good of others are blessed.

Background study

Look into the historical background of the story, and the circumstances and privations of the captivity.

CSSU publish a book called 'Persecution' by sister Hannah Hayles, which brings to life the Biblical account of the life of Esther. It is aimed at teenagers, but you may like to read it yourself!

Suggested outline of lesson

During the course of this first lesson about Esther, it will be necessary to identify the characters in the account and provide a background. Some of the following points may be woven into the story.

About Ahasuerus

Ahasuerus is not a name, but a title - like Pharaoh, and we have to rely on details in the book of Esther to find out which king is being referred to. It seems to be generally accepted that the king is Xerxes, the son of Darius, who reigned from 486 to 465 BC. He was ruler of a vast empire which extended from India to Ethiopia. He saw few of his subjects because, in the interests of security, the throne room was separated from the rest of the great hall by a curtain and only seven of his closest advisers were allowed to go beyond this curtain without invitation. All others, including his family, had to wait for a signal of approval. His rule was supreme, and he needed to consult no one in making decisions. He could honour whomsoever he chose and put to death any who offended him.

Mordecai at the palace

Mordecai, of the tribe of Benjamin, was one of many Jews in the city – a descendant of those who had been carried away to Babylon (that seems to be the meaning of Esther 2:6) and when given the chance by Cyrus to return to their homeland, had elected to stay. The Persians treated conquered peoples with exceptional leniency and therefore the Jews were able to maintain their identity. Mordecai was employed at the palace, which explains why he was able to communicate with Esther, and knew what was going on at court.

Shushan was a bustling, cosmopolitan centre, a natural cross-roads for travellers from Asia Minor to India. The palace must have been very splendid with its marble pillars, gold and silver couches, mosaic pavements and silk curtains.

Hadassah, aka Esther

Introduce the lesson by talking about princesses, and about the difference between those born in the royal household and those elevated by marriage to the responsibilities of royalty. Use examples from the children's own knowledge. Lead into the story by stating that it is about an ordinary girl who became queen of a vast world empire. Introduce Esther as a Jewish orphan adopted by her cousin Mordecai. She was a beautiful and charming girl brought up in the Jewish tradition - Hadassah (Esther 2:7) is her Hebrew name - and her life was far removed from the royal court.

The banishing of Vashti

Ahasuerus had been on the throne for three years when he held the magnificent banquet for his nobles and provincial governors at which he displayed the splendour of his possessions. Imagine the anger of the king when his command for the queen to appear was disobeyed, and the consternation among his guests. His pride was injured at being rebuffed in public, and he sought advice on how to deal with the offending queen. Note that the advice the counsellors gave affected not only Vashti, but the whole nation. With Vashti banished, another woman had to be found to take her place. Finding one girl from such a large empire took a lot of organizing. Even when the girls had been chosen from every province, there was a long period of preparation before they were presented to the king (it was four years before the new queen was proclaimed). Esther was among those selected. It is likely that not only her beauty but also her kind, God-fearing nature and sense of duty helped Esther win the favour of Hegai, by whom she was given special privileges. But she must have found life in the court difficult because Mordecai had forbidden her to disclose her Jewish nationality.

Relevance to the children's lives

Mordecai cared about the king's safety and warned him of the danger he was in. How can we show our care for other people? What should we do if we see someone being bullied? What should we do if we know someone is doing something wrong, such as stealing, or damaging other people's property?

Esther is chosen

Picture the excitement and apprehension among the girls when presented to the king, and the celebrations and rejoicing when Esther was chosen to be queen. The festivities following the coronation must have been magnificent and very costly.

Esther did not reveal her nationality or her relationship with Mordecai, but they were able to communicate with each other and, in spite of her elevated position, Esther was still guided by her cousin. Consequently she listened to his warning of a plot to kill the king and was able to help save his life. The conspirators were caught and hanged, and Mordecai's loyalty was recorded in the royal chronicle.

Worksheets

Esther becomes queen in place of Vashti:

1	2	3	4	5	6
V	A	S	H	T	I
V	S	S	H	T	I
V	S	T	H	T	I
V	S	T	H	E	I
E	S	T	H	E	I
E	S	T	H	E	R

Prayer

Dear Lord God, thank you for caring for us each day. Help us to consider others, and to help them when we can. Amen.

Memory verse

“The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found grace and favour in his sight” (Esther 2:17).