

ESTHER

SILENT BUT SOVEREIGN

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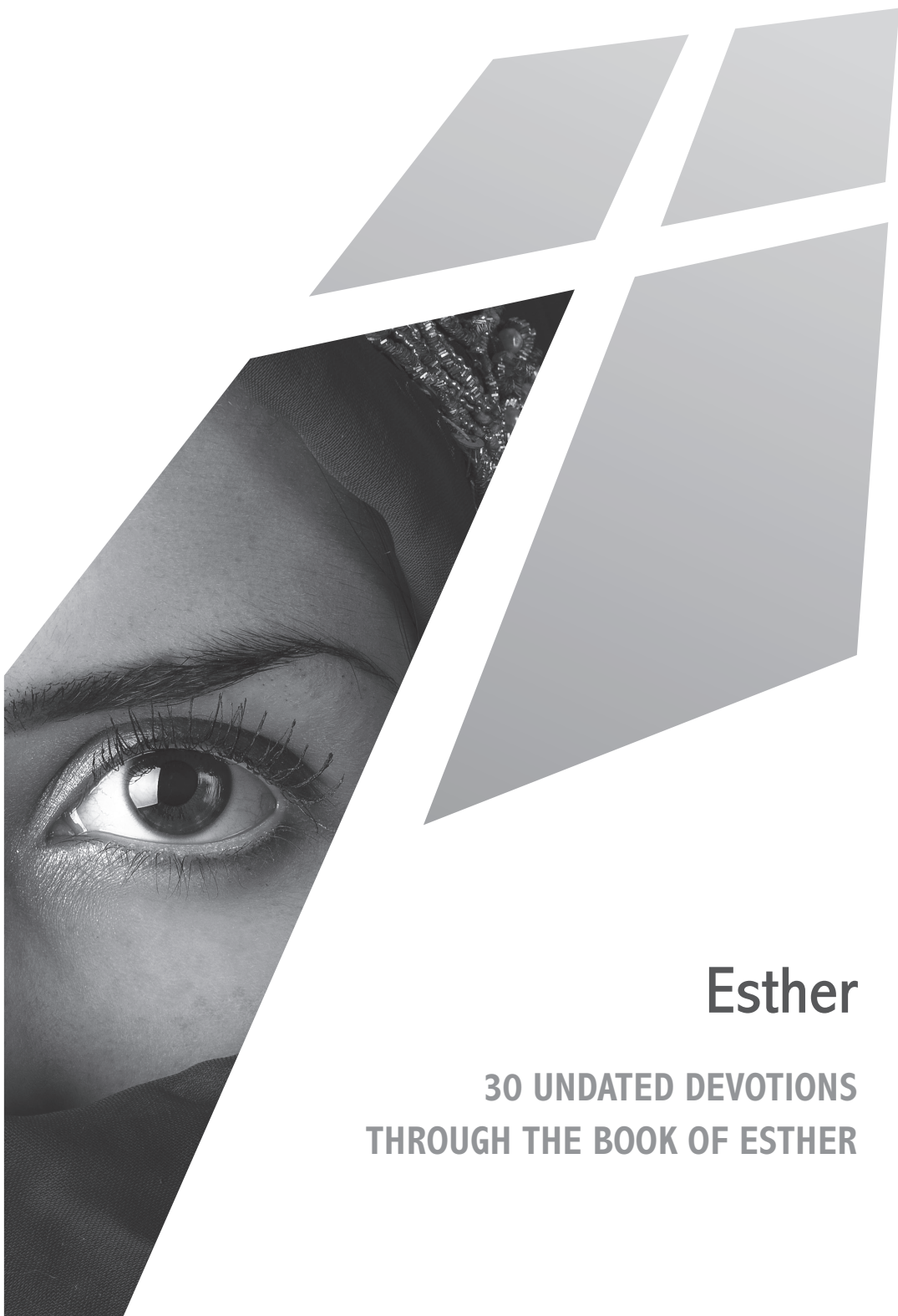
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Esther

30 UNDATED DEVOTIONS
THROUGH THE BOOK OF ESTHER

INTRODUCTION

'Where are you, God?' I'm sure most of us have at some time found ourselves in a situation that has challenged our faith and prompted that searching question.

The story of Esther is one of hope for those of us who find ourselves doubting God's sovereignty when we can't hear His voice or see what He is doing. We don't see God's name as we read through the pages of the story. He is not even mentioned at all. He is seemingly silent throughout the whole book, and yet He is actively working in every scene to bring about His purposes for His people.

It's my prayer that as you look into the book of Esther, you'll see and understand more of God's sovereignty, more of His faithfulness to His people, and more of His commitment to deliver and save. And that you'll be more equipped to trust Him even when it's not clear what He's doing.

The narrative of Esther is fast paced. For the sake of daily devotions that are manageable, we have broken up the readings into short passages. The down-side to this is that some of the original pace and drama can be lost. We therefore suggest that you read through the whole of Esther before you begin the devotions.

The story of Esther is set in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. Verse 1 tells us that the Persian Empire extended from India to Cush (Ethiopia), over 127 provinces. That made it the largest and most powerful empire in the world and King Xerxes, who ruled over the empire, the most powerful man in the world at that time.

Many years before Esther's story begins, the Jews experienced civil war and the Jewish nation was divided into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom was called Israel, and the Southern Kingdom, Judah. Most of the kings of Israel and Judah didn't walk with God consistently, so God judged them because of their unfaithfulness. First, Israel was attacked by Assyria and captured. Then, over 100 years later, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah, deported the King to Babylon and removed the temple treasures –we read about this in 2 Kings 24. Eleven years later Nebuchadnezzar returned, destroying Jerusalem and taking most of the Jews into captivity.

It could have seemed to the Jews, and to the surrounding nations, that God had finally deserted them. But although invisible He was active, ordering the events of history in such a way as to preserve His people and keep them from being completely destroyed by the Babylonians.

In 539 BC Babylon fell into the hands of the Medo-Persians and around 486 BC – 100 years after the fall of Jerusalem – Xerxes became king of the vast Persian Empire.

The book of Esther records a small piece of history, spanning ten years, of the life of the Jews living in exile in Persia. It may have

seemed to the exiled Jews that God had completely turned His back on them and was no longer working to deliver and save them from their enemies. But as the story of Esther unfolds, we will see that God is always working for His people's good; He is never inactive.

Maybe you've experienced devastating blows in the past that you've not yet recovered from. Maybe fears about the future overwhelm you. Perhaps you're currently experiencing trials that threaten to pull you under a rising tide of despair and doubt. In the midst of such desperation, God is there. The book of Esther shows us that He doesn't stand by passively, watching His people suffer, but He is actively working to bring about their deliverance.

REFLECTION

What issues and cultural trends do we face in contemporary society that might cause us to doubt God's concern for His people? What truths about God's character can we call to mind in times of doubt or uncertainty?

Xerxes was in the third year of his reign, having defeated Egypt at war, when he gave a great banquet. Verse 4 tells us that the banquet lasted 180 days and was an extravagant exhibition of King Xerxes' greatness and wealth. This banquet was probably given as a reward to military officers and noblemen from all over the kingdom and was possibly also an opportunity to plan for the upcoming invasion of Greece.

At the end of the six-month-long banquet, King Xerxes gave another banquet that lasted seven days. This banquet was for everyone who lived in the citadel of Susa. No-one was excluded, from the greatest to the least. Again, it was a lavish banquet. Verse 7 records that: 'Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality.' The guests could drink a little or a lot, or not at all if they chose. Everyone was free to do as they wished.

Verse 6 describes the garden of the king's palace in Susa and shows that life in the Persian Court during King Xerxes' reign was luxurious. They feasted on fine foods and drank from gold cups. The Persian court was dripping with wealth and extravagance.

King Xerxes was an incredibly powerful and proud king. At the beginning of his reign he was the most powerful man on earth. Archaeologists excavating at Susa have found inscriptions from that time in which King Xerxes refers to himself as, 'The great King, The King of Kings; The King of

the lands occupied by many races; The King of this great earth.' He obviously thought a lot of himself and very little about the God of Israel.

In contrast, read Philippians 2:5–11. Compare Xerxes' pride with the humility of Jesus, the true 'King of kings'. In his pride, Xerxes believed that he was greater than God Himself. How do you view yourself? Does your attitude reflect the humility of Jesus or are you tempted to believe that you are more important than God and others?

True greatness is demonstrated in humble self-sacrifice. Jesus said,

'... whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mk. 10:43–45).

REFLECTION

What does your lifestyle say about your priorities? Are you using every resource God has given you for His kingdom and glory or do you live for your own pleasure and satisfaction?