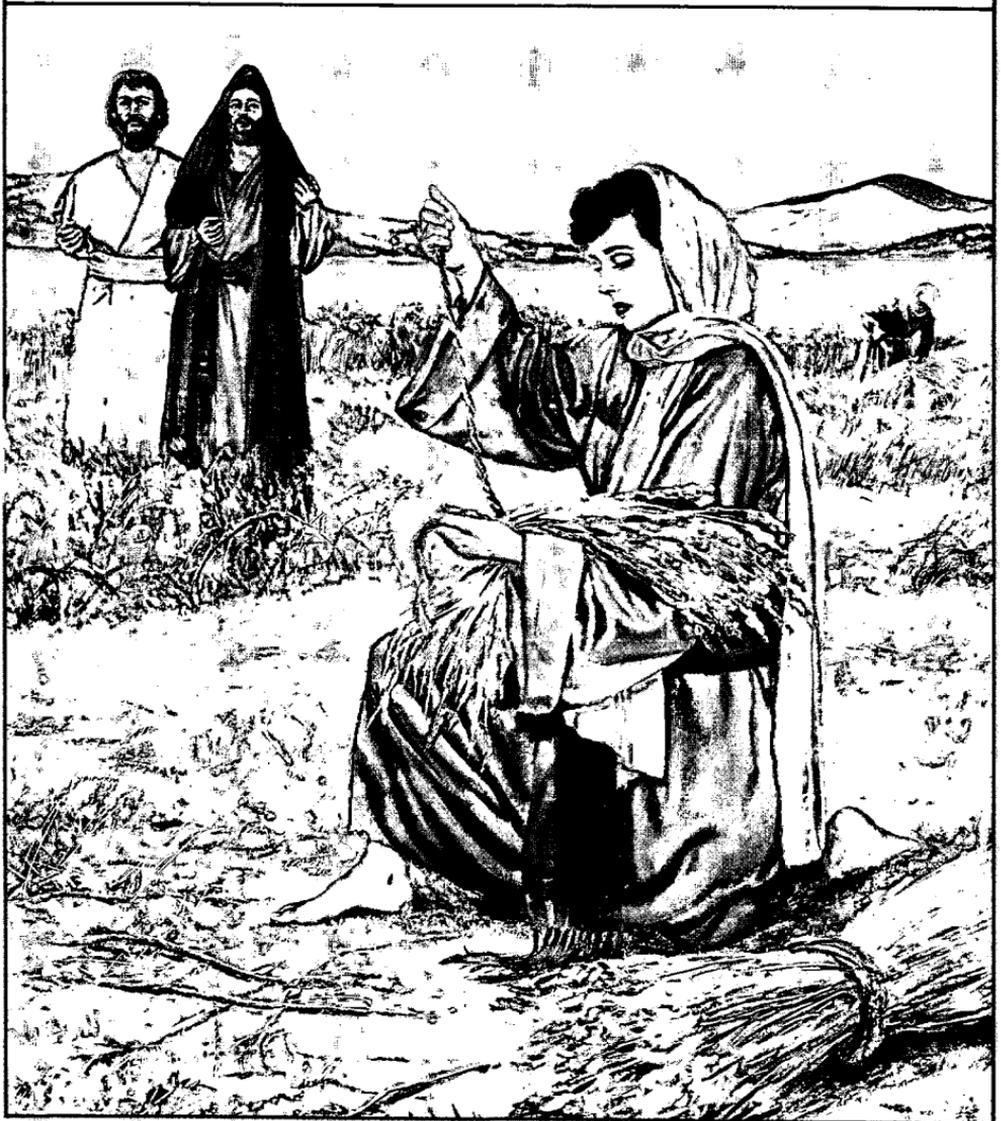


Adult

Sabbath School Lessons

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives



OCTOBER, NOVEMBER, DECEMBER 1987

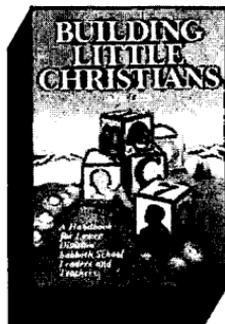
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**Meet
the Author
of . . .**



This Quarter's Lessons

Gerald Wheeler is associate book editor for the Review and Herald Publishing Association in Hagerstown, Maryland. His entire professional career has been involved in publishing work, beginning at Southern Publishing Association where he served from 1967 to 1980. His degrees include a BA in English and an MA in Old Testament from Andrews University, and an MA in library science from the University of Michigan.

Wheeler has written six books, including one he co-authored with his wife, Penny. He also has had numerous articles published in Adventist periodicals. The Wheelers have four children, all living at home. He enjoys riding in and photographing passenger trains, writing, and studying cultural and historical backgrounds of Biblical events.

Foreword

The Scriptures portray a predominantly male world. The Old Testament mentions women only a fraction of the time that it mentions men. Three books—Obadiah, Habakkuk, and Haggai—do not refer to women at all. The names of 32 men are found in the title of Bible books, whereas just two women have been given that honor.

But the Bible is not concerned with percentages of representation. Nor is it concerned with depicting a male-dominated world. Considering women's position in society during Bible times, women were well represented. The principles that their stories teach have great value for us today. The Bible presents the stories of people—men, women, and children—who respond positively to, or reject, God's leading. The Scriptures tell the stories of those who accept or spurn the divine call to lead godlike lives under all conditions and circumstances. To dwell on the fact that Bible times may have been male- or adult-oriented is to miss the point. God looks for people who will live for Him and depict His love through concrete action wherever they are, whatever the time and situation.

During this quarter we will study the books of Ruth and Esther. Their main characters include several women. But they present more than just stories about women—they present stories of women, and also men, who lived for God despite difficult and trying circumstances. These women and men represented Him and His love in a world of tragedy, injustice, and danger.

Naomi struggled with the question of why God seemingly allowed the tragedy of death to sweep her family away. Esther lived in a time when the very existence of God's people seemed to be at stake. In both books, we see men and women meeting life in ways that reveal to us how to be godly during emergencies and in everyday duties. Many of the people we will meet were God's people who responded to His leading wherever they were, no matter how difficult the situation.

Doing God's Will in Difficult Times

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Selected texts, including portions of Ruth and Esther.



MEMORY TEXT: "Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me" (Isa. 6:8).

CENTRAL THOUGHT: God looks for and uses people of all kinds who will take hold of the task He has in mind for them.

OVERVIEW:

- I. How People Have Been and Are Being Used by God.
- II. Living Godly Lives in the Midst of Chaos (Ruth).
- III. Living Godly Lives in Exile (Esther).
- IV. Women in the Bible.
- V. Called to a Task.

INTRODUCTION: Jamie looked at his father, his little Bible clutched in his hand. "Daddy, why aren't there any stories about children in the Bible?"

His father thought a second. "Well, there are quite a few stories about children. Let's see if we can remember some of them. First, there's the one about Samuel as a boy, and the lad with the loaves and fishes." A few minutes later, Jamie went on his way satisfied.

But, his father thought to himself, most of the stories in the Bible are not about children, nor are most of them about women, either. The Bible world—particularly during Old Testament times—definitely seemed to be a man's world. However, when he stopped to think it through, he realized that the Bible is about people—all sorts of people. Men, women, and children of all kinds have been used by God in special ways. God continues today to look for people who will live for Him and serve as He wishes them to serve. When we accept the challenge He presents, He will use us to accomplish the tasks He has set before us.

I. HOW PEOPLE HAVE BEEN AND ARE BEING USED BY GOD.

What did the lad who responded to the need of the hungry multitude in Jesus' day have to offer? John 6:9-11.

He was not ashamed to offer what he had, little though it might be. He seemed pleased to have a part in one of Christ's most impressive miracles.

What does the boy's act of sharing the little he had tell us about what we are to do in Christ's work today?

"Christ has bidden us, through the prophet, 'Deal thy bread to the hungry,' and satisfy the afflicted soul; 'when thou seest the naked that thou cover him,' and 'bring the poor that are cast out to thy house.' Isaiah 58:7-10. He has bidden us, 'Go you into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.' Mark 16:15. But how often our hearts sink, and faith fails us, as we see how great is the need, and how small the means in our hands. Like Andrew looking upon the five barley loaves and the two little fishes; we exclaim, 'What are they among so many?' Often we hesitate, unwilling to give all that we have, fearing to spend and to be spent for others. But Jesus has bidden us, 'Give ye them to eat.' His command is a promise; and behind it is the same power that fed the multitude beside the sea."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 369.

What can we learn from the way the woman of Shunem contributed to the mission of the prophet Elisha? 2 Kings 4:8-10.

"To this retreat Elisha often came, thankful for its quiet peace."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 237. Through the provision of a guest room and a meal, the woman contributed greatly to the success of Elisha's God-given task. Her deed was but one manifestation of a godly life.

What wonderful message did the four lepers bring to the besieged city of Samaria? 2 Kings 7:1-11.

"During the night of the flight [of the Syrian invaders], four leprous men at the gate of the city, made desperate by hunger, had proposed to visit the Syrian camp and throw themselves upon the mercy of the besiegers, hoping thereby to arouse sympathy and obtain food. What was their astonishment when, entering the camp, they found 'no man there.' With none to molest or forbid, 'they went into one tent, and did eat and drink, and carried thence silver, and gold, and raiment, and went and hid it; and came again and entered into another tent and carried thence also, and went and hid it. Then they said to one another, 'We do not well: this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace.' Quickly they returned to the city with the glad news."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 258.

Because lepers were outcasts they must have been tempted to keep the news of the enemy retreat and the spoils to themselves. After all, how had the people of Samaria treated them in the past? But God offered them the opportunity to proclaim Samaria's deliverance. How many more people would have starved to death had they hesitated?

THINK IT THROUGH: Do we hesitate to proclaim deliverance to others?

In what spirit did Mary, the mother of Jesus, accept her God-assigned task? Luke 1:26-38.

The role Gabriel held out to the young girl was a difficult one. It carried with it stigma and great shame. Yet with "sweet, childlike faith" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 98) she accepted it. She did what she could where she was despite the difficult circumstances. God desires the same response from each one of us.



II. LIVING GODLY LIVES IN THE MIDST OF CHAOS (RUTH).

What was the recurring theme of the lives of too many of God's people after the death of Joshua? Judges 2:11; 4:1; 6:1.

The history of the period of the Judges makes sad reading. We see God's people succumbing to apostasy, depravity, strife, hatred, and every possible perversion or distortion of His plan for them. Perhaps we may wish that these stories were not in the Bible. But God's portrayal of the results of sin is honest and accurate.

When did the events of the Book of Ruth take place? Ruth 1:1.

Even in the worst of times, people must continue to live out their lives. In the chaos of the period of the Judges, the children of Israel still had to make those choices that would result either in continuing apostasy and rebellion, or in godly lives worthy of their Creator. We can never escape that responsibility no matter what the situation is in which we might find ourselves. Nothing ever can be an excuse for not doing God's will. The book of Ruth gives us an unforgettable glimpse of that fact. One author, speaking about the contrast between the story of Ruth and the events of Judges 19-21, has observed, "Here are covenant, custom, institutions gone awry, contrasted with a scene in which things go as they should, in which people make the right decrees, in which Yahweh is anything but lost."—Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1975), p. 36.

During the confusion of the centuries of the judges, God's people still could live godly lives; not only amid the drama of the battlefield, but also in the domestic lulls of those interludes of comparative peace. It is possible to live a godly life at any time if we will but respond to God's leading whenever He calls.

What can we learn from the way Boaz responded when he saw someone in need of help? Ruth 2:8, 16, 17.

The godly life is lived through concrete deeds and actions for others. God's people do not just believe—they live out that belief. They make the decisions and choices and take the actions available to them.

How did the women of Bethlehem summarize the choices that Ruth made and the actions she took? Ruth 4:15.

The godly life also is a life of love, and love is not merely what we feel but what we do. When we are in love we do loving things. Christian love consists of doing those big and small deeds that together make up the daily life of the person who reflects Jesus in all that he or she is and does.



III. LIVING GODLY LIVES IN EXILE (ESTHER).

How did the Jews come to be in Persia? 2 Chron. 36:14-18.

The Old Testament recites the long, sad history of the rebellion of the Chosen People. Finally the Lord allowed them to be taken into captivity and exile for their own benefit. But He did not give up on them. No matter how difficult the situation, it still is possible to obey Him, to live a life that reflects His character. Accepting His promised power in their lives, some of the Jews learned how to live godly lives even in distant lands of exile.

What did God urge His people to do during their exile? Jer. 29:4-7.

The Lord asked them to demonstrate their hope in Him by continuing the daily round of life under almost overwhelming circumstances. They were to remain Jews and were not to be amalgamated among the people around them, as the captives from the northern kingdom had been.

ILLUMINATION: "In the 37th year of the captivity of Jehoiachin (561 B.C.), he was released from prison by Amel-Marduk, Nebuchadnezzar's son, and apparently received honorable treatment from then on (2 Kings 25:27-30; Jer. 52:31-34). The very fact the Babylonians released Jehoiachin without fear of any unrest or anti-Babylonian agitation, reveals that the Jews must have gained the respect of their masters and been considered decent and respectable citizens. In the course of time some of the Jews came to honor and office in the government, and others gained a place in the business and professional world. The books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther reveal how exiles penetrated every branch of government, and even occupied the highest offices in the life of the state. Jews were royal door-keepers, cupbearers, provincial governors, and royal counselors (Esther 2:19; 10:3; Neh. 2:1; 5:14, etc.). Their rapid ascent in the social life of the empire may have caused the hatred they encountered in the time of Xerxes [described in Esther].

"But the Bible is not the only source from which we learn of the social and material rise of the Jews in the land of their captivity. Documents discovered during the excavations of Nippur by the expedition of the University of Pennsylvania also provide light. The archives of a great banking firm in the city of Nippur, 'Murashu Sons,' which consist of many thousands of clay tablets, allow us to look into the business life of this important city. Although these documents come from the time of Artaxerxes I and Darius II,

hence actually from a period after the Exile, they provide valuable information from which conclusions in regard to earlier periods can be drawn. We find that among the clients of 'Murashu Sons' were many Jews, who formed a wealthy and influential minority in Nippur and the surrounding country. They appear in these documents as tenants, as creditors with large sums of money, even as inspectors in the office of revenue, and administrative heads of districts. These documents from Nippur support data in Daniel and Ezra, where we read of Jews occupying important offices in Babylonia and Persia."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 65.

The Jewish community in Babylonia attracted many to the knowledge of the true God, and helped support financially the Jewish community in Jerusalem until the destruction of the temple by the Romans. Although most of God's people failed to return to the promised land, many of them lived godly lives in the land of exile.

When God permitted persecution to come to some of His people in exile, how did they respond? Esther 3:12-4:3; 9:1-5.

The captivity had taught some not to despair and give up hope, but to do what they could and to trust the rest to God. Mordecai went to Esther because he believed that God expected him to do what he could. (See Esther 4:13-17.) The life of the follower of God is not a passive one. We demonstrate the reality of our religious beliefs by our daily deeds.



IV. WOMEN IN THE BIBLE.

Although the two books of the Bible we will be studying this quarter include women among their main characters, we will not be examining the role of women in Scripture as such. But before getting involved in detailed study of these books, we should discuss briefly women's role in society in Bible times, especially during the Old Testament period. In the New Testament women played an important part in church life.

NOTE: Two women are listed among the heroes and heroines of faith in Hebrews 11, and four women were listed in the genealogy in the Gospel of Matthew as ancestors of Jesus.

The events of the Bible took place in a largely male-oriented culture. Patriarchal societies did place some limits on the position and activities of women. But there is a more fundamental reason behind these limitations; one that we often overlook. It has been said that the existence of the human race hangs by the slender thread of a single generation. New births alone keep humanity from extinction. Today, in a world struggling with population, we sometimes forget this fact that has characterized most of world history.

Our ancestors never forgot it however. They knew the dangers of child-birth, the struggle to raise a child to adulthood in times of mass infant mortality. They realized that nothing could replace a mother.

What crucial role characterizes the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31:10-31?

Recognizing woman's vital importance, Israelite society exempted her from many responsibilities, allowing her to concentrate on the fundamental task of bearing and raising the next generation.

ILLUMINATION: "This function of the woman, and the intimate and demanding nurture of the young that resulted from it, was so crucial that woman, its primary agent, was reinforced in many ways. She had the option of attending the major festivals rather than the obligation to go. . . . Although she had access to communal affairs outside the home, her participation was voluntary rather than mandatory. Men, lacking so crucial a function, were assigned two roles: the epitome of the family, a position not normally held by a woman, and the priestly office, a position never held by a woman. The reinforcements given should be understood in the context of a high death rate for mothers and infants in childbirth. The survival of the people was always in question. The conserving of the agent by which it was to be achieved [woman] was essential.

"Those women who had outlived the age of childbearing, who had recognized abilities, or to whom the Lord appeared, seem to have functioned outside the home in all capacities except the priesthood. The number of the reports of such women is small. This is probably to be attributed to the death rate in childbirth and to the demands on energy and time made by child care and homemaking. There is no evidence that public careers were closed to women, or that they were felt to be unqualified to occupy them. On the contrary, there is ample evidence that women did function in a wide range of careers, from ruler to businesswoman, from prophetess to sage."—John H. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed: The Status of Women in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), p. 193.



V. CALLED TO A TASK.

Even though Israelite society regarded the woman's primary role as raising the next generation, that did not mean that it was her only role. God might call her to do many different things. In this section of the lesson we will look at some of the kinds of tasks that God summoned women in the Bible to perform for Him.

SEARCH AND LEARN:

What dual position did Deborah hold in Israel? Judges 4:4, 5.

Who saved the life of the future king Joash? 2 Kings 11:1-3.

What physically demanding tasks did several women perform? 1 Chron. 7:24; Neh. 3:12.

Through whom did Josiah inquire of the Lord about the scroll found in the temple? 2 Kings 22:8-20. (Notice that male prophets lived in the same area.)

Whom did the angel commission to tell Jesus' disciples about His resurrection? Matt. 28:1-8.

As is true of all of God's faithful followers, these women were willing to take hold of any responsibility that He sent their way.



FURTHER STUDY AND MEDITATION: "To everyone who becomes a partaker of His grace the Lord appoints a work for others. Individually we are to stand in our lot and place, saying, 'Here am I; send me.' Isaiah 6:8. Upon the minister of the word, the missionary nurse, the Christian physician, the individual Christian, whether he be merchant or farmer, professional man or mechanic—the responsibility rests upon all. It is our work to reveal to men the gospel of their salvation."—*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 148.

SUMMARY: The Bible relates God's willingness to use people who are at the right place and time for His cause. Whether we are what we consider "gifted" or not, if we are where God needs something done, He can use us if we are willing to be used. We may consider ourselves ordinary, but God can do great things with and through us. Our duty is to respond to Him, to accept the task and responsibility God assigns us.

APPLICATION

- What is my task for my place and time? Am I fulfilling it? Am I willing to be a Boaz or a Ruth or a Mordecai or an Esther?
- Am I using my God-given gifts to the fullest extent in His service?

Question received from a Sabbath School member: "The change in our new quarterly, placing Sabbath in the beginning of the lesson, surprised me. What is the purpose of this change?"

Editor's reply: Our decision to indicate Sabbath afternoon study is based on Ellen White's counsel: "Let the Sabbath-school lesson be learned, not by a hasty glance at the lesson scripture on Sabbath morning, but by a careful study for the next week on Sabbath afternoon, with daily review or illustration during the week. Thus the lesson will become fixed in the memory, a treasure never to be wholly lost.—*Education*, pp. 251, 252.

Introduction to the Book of Ruth

The book of Ruth has captured the attention of generations of readers as one of the most beautiful love stories ever written. But it is more than a love story. Through the lives of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz it prefigures the salvation that Jesus Christ would later bring to all who are willing to accept Him.

Like Job, Naomi questioned why tragedy had devastated her life. She challenged God to show why He permitted such things to happen to her. God provided a solution to her problems through the kinsman-redeemer, Boaz. Boaz resolved Naomi's predicament by means of the Biblical tradition of the court hearing at the village gate, giving us a glimpse of divine justice at work.

The book of Ruth, as we know it, probably was written about the time of David. Jewish tradition suggests that Samuel was the author.

Through Ruth the Moabitess, God revealed His desire that Israel would bring salvation to the world. In each of the characters featured in this book, we see how God wants us to love and live. We also note how He accomplishes His plans through human actions.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF RUTH

Ruth 1:1-18	Refugees in Moab
Ruth 1:19-22	The Sad Return to Judah
Ruth 2:1-23	Ruth's Care of Naomi
Ruth 3:1-18	Naomi Seeks a Home for Ruth
Ruth 4:1-22	How Ruth Became an Ancestor of the Greatest Redeemer, Christ

Tragedy in the Promised Land

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ruth 1:1-18.



MEMORY TEXT: "And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people will be my people, and thy God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Even when struggling in the midst of tragedy and disaster, the lives of God's people demonstrate something that captivates those around them.

OVERVIEW: Ruth 1:1-18

1:1-5 Famine in Judah	1:6-10 Decision to Return to Bethlehem	1:11-18 Decisions of the Daughters-in-law
Flight to Moab (1, 2) Elimelech dies and sons marry (3, 4) Sons die (5)	Naomi hears that God aids His people (6) Naomi begins return (7) Naomi urges Ruth and Orpah to stay (8, 9) They vow to go with her (10)	Naomi again urges them to return (11-13) Orpah's decision (14) Ruth's decision (15-18)

INTRODUCTION: People often dismiss the book of Ruth as little more than a beautiful human love story. Some regard it as a source of types and object lessons. But it is much more than these. It is a story of God in action—both on the human level and on the level of the great controversy between good and evil.

But how can the book be about God when, except for a few passing references to His name, He does not appear in it? Actually He does—through the people the story is about. "The single most characteristic way in which the story-teller makes God manifest . . . is by working out a correspondence between the way God acts and the way the people in the story act."

"God is present and active in the Ruth story especially in the way in which the people behave toward one another."—Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth*, p. 29.

God's true followers will treat each other the way that He treats them. Each one of us is to be His agent, His hands and feet, as well as His voice on

earth. The Lord desired that His chosen people would represent Him to the people around them. Doing so would have created an ever-widening circle that eventually would encompass the entire world. Unfortunately, they failed, to a large measure. But some did reveal His love and character to those of other nations. Naomi was one of these. She demonstrated that true religion does not consist so much in what we know as in how we live. When we live godly lives, others can see God in and through us. We will reflect the love that Jesus demonstrated when He lived on earth.

**I. FAMINE IN JUDAH (Ruth 1:1-5).**

(When studying this lesson, read each Scripture portion carefully before responding to the study questions.)

1. Flight to Moab (Ruth 1:1, 2).

When did the incidents reported in the book of Ruth take place?

The book of Judges reveals that this was a sad period in Israel's history. But God can work at any time, and in any place. He is not limited to working in spectacular ways. The Lord can accomplish mighty things in quiet grain fields as well as amid the din and dust of battlefields.

THINK IT THROUGH: Compare how God has worked in the quiet times as well as in the dramatic events of your life. Can you think of some events of each type that particularly shaped your life?

Why was Moab a strange place for an Israelite family to flee to? See Deut. 23:3-6.

Moab was only a short distance by modern standards from Elimelech and Naomi's home village of Bethlehem. Because of the varied geography of Palestine, one area might receive only sparse rainfall while, but a few miles away another region might have adequate moisture. Notice that the book of Ruth neither condemns nor approves of the family's flight to Moab. God always begins working with people where they are, seeking to bring good out of any situation (Rom. 8:28). Perhaps God saw in the famine an opportunity to bring Naomi and Ruth together, or, because Elimelech had chosen to go to Moab, God brought Ruth in contact with Naomi in order to turn an unfortunate situation into an opportunity for good.

THINK IT THROUGH: What other incidents in the Scriptures can you think of where God used famine or other problems to bring His representative to someone who longed for a knowledge of the true God?

**2. Left a Widow (Ruth 1:3-5).**

In the ancient Near East, a woman's value and her sense of self-worth largely rested in her relationship to the men in her life, whether they were father, husband, or sons. For her to suddenly lose her male relatives was traumatic. Widowhood involved far more than the death of her husband.

M. David writes that “we can be tempted to read our own ideas into the word *widow* whenever we come across it in ancient laws and understand by it the wife of a dead man. In Assyrian law (to mention only that one) as well as in the Old Testament, the concept of widow is not confined to family life. It also has social implications. According to the Bible, not every wife of a deceased man is a widow. If the woman returns to the house of her parents and the authority of her father, she is not a widow. She is a widow only as long as she remains independent of every family tie, and therefore generally takes no share of the family property. Hence, the care of widows which is a constant feature of the Old Testament.”—Quoted in Hans Jochen Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), pp. 18, 19.

It was devastating for a woman to become a widow during a time when society did not provide such things as insurance policies and pensions. On the other hand, God made special provision for widows.

SEARCH AND LEARN: From the following passages pick out the provisions God made for widows:

1. Ex. 22:22 _____
2. Deut. 10:18 _____
3. Deut. 24:17 _____
4. Jer. 7:6 _____
5. Acts 6:1 _____
6. James 1:27 _____

Jesus gave a classic example of love toward the widow when He raised the son of the widow of Nain. (See Luke 7:11-15.)

How does the ancient definition of a widow help us to understand what 1 Timothy 5:3 means when it talks about being real widows?

THINK IT THROUGH: How should we apply this Scriptural advice?

II. DECISION TO RETURN TO BETHLEHEM (Ruth 1:6-10).

What good news came to Naomi? Ruth 1:6.

Notice how Scripture views the end of the famine as an action of God Himself. The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, views the hand of God at work in every aspect of life, not just the spectacular and the miraculous. Recognizing this fact will help us understand a charge that Naomi later on brings against God.

Ancient Near Eastern custom called for the two daughters-in-law to return to the families of their fathers until their remarriage (Gen. 38:11; Lev. 22:13), but Ruth and Orpah chose to go to a foreign and perhaps hostile land with their mother-in-law. Naomi belonged to another people with different customs and traditions. But her life had made a strong impact on the two Moabite women. Here is an example of true godly witness in action. Whether Naomi should or should not have gone to Moab in the first place is not important at this stage in her experience. What is important is that while living there she revealed the kind of character that God seeks in His people.

III. DECISION OF THE DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW (Ruth 1:11-18).

1. Naomi Urges Her Daughters to Return (Ruth 1:11-13).

Why did Naomi urge Ruth and Orpah to return to their own families? Verses 11-13.

Naomi spoke to them within the context of the ancient custom of levirate marriage. Although we do not have enough information to be able to answer many of the questions this custom raises, here is what we understand that levirate marriage meant: "According to a law (Deut. 25:5-10), if brothers live together and one of them dies without issue, one of the surviving brothers takes his widow to wife, and the first-born of the new marriage is regarded in law as the son of the deceased. The brother-in-law can, however, decline this obligation by making a declaration before the elders of the town; but it is a dishonorable action. The widow takes off his shoe and spits in his face, because 'he does not raise up his brother's house.'

"This institution is called levirate, from the Latin *levir*, translating the Hebrew *yabam* ('brother-in-law'). Only two examples of it occur in the Old Testament, both of them difficult to interpret and only imperfectly corresponding to the law in Deuteronomy: the stories of Tamar and Ruth."—Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, vol. 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), p. 37.

"The first son born from this union became the dead man's heir. In this way the marriage of the dead man's widow to a *stranger* . . . was prevented and the dead man's name was not *blotted out of Israel*."—J.A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), p. 251.

As Naomi urged her two daughters-in-law not to accompany her back to Bethlehem, the stark reality of her situation overwhelmed her. While Ruth and Orpah had lost their husbands, they still had the prospect of marrying again and of having children, especially sons, to give them purpose and self-worth in life.

NOTES:



To what agency did Naomi attribute her problems and why? Ruth 1:13.

Naomi could see “no prospect other than a lonely old age, embittered by the thought that *the hand of the Lord is gone out against me*. . . . These concluding words arise from a conviction that underlies the whole of the book, namely, that things do not happen by chance. God is a sovereign God and He brings to pass what He will. Thus Naomi can ascribe responsibility for what has befallen her to no-one but Him. *The hand of the Lord* is an anthropomorphism [a way of describing God in human terms] in fairly common use. The Old Testament uses parts of the body freely to express inward states and the like, and does this even when speaking of God. God’s *hand* is a way, then, of speaking of God’s activity. The verb *gone out* is sometimes used of an army going out with hostile intent, and this may be behind the usage here. . . . Naomi cannot encourage the girls to stay with her. Yahweh is her enemy.”—Leon Morris, *Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), p. 258.

THINK IT THROUGH: Can you identify with Naomi? Have you sometimes felt that “the hand of the Lord” was against you? Does the knowledge that Satan is responsible for calamity and evil always answer the question of why God permitted him to afflict you? (Ruth 1:13, NIV).

SEARCH AND LEARN: What parallels do you find between Naomi’s experience and that of Job?

What differences do you find?



2. The Decisions (Ruth 1:13-18).

Compare the differing responses of Ruth and Orpah to Naomi’s suggestion? Ruth 1:13-18.

What was Orpah’s final response?

Orpah had shown great love and respect for Naomi. But God ever seeks greater things for us. He leads men and women on to greater and greater truth as they respond willingly. But some refuse to advance further. The level of Christian character they already have reached seems good enough. Perhaps God has new challenges for future service, but they refuse them. They have lost the desire to seek the new truths He waits to open to them. The problem can manifest itself in many ways. For such people there is danger that they will return to former peoples and gods.

What was Ruth's response? Ruth 1:16, 17.

This is one of the finest personal testimonies recorded in the Bible as well as being a literary masterpiece. Ruth chose the even better as opposed to the merely good. She was willing to be joined to Naomi's people and to God, both in life and death.

ILLUMINATION: "Ruth's only knowledge of the true God was what she had seen of Him reflected in Naomi and the other members of Naomi's family. It is ever thus that God reveals Himself to men—by a demonstration of the power of His love operating in the lives of erstwhile sinners."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 432.

The Moabite daughter-in-law committed herself to her new way of life with an oath using the divine name. "She puts herself on oath, and invokes the punishment of the God of the Israelites if she should let anything less than death part her from Naomi."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 432.

 **THINK IT THROUGH:** Jesus challenged the rich young ruler to do greater things. The man turned away from the challenge in sorrow. How will we respond to Christ's calls to the "even better" in our lives?

SUMMARIZE: Paraphrase Ruth's reply in words that fit your own life situation and circumstances.

FURTHER STUDY AND MEDITATION: The children of Israel were to occupy all the territory which God appointed them. Those nations that rejected the worship and service of the true God were to be dispossessed. But it was God's purpose that, by the revelation of His character through Israel, those who did not know Christ should be drawn to Him. Through the teaching of the sacrificial service, Christ was to be uplifted before the nations. All who would look unto Him should live. Like Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabitess, those who turned to the worship of the true God were to unite themselves with His chosen people. As the numbers of Israel increased they were to enlarge their borders, until their kingdom should embrace the world.

"God desired to bring all peoples under His merciful rule. He desired that the earth should be filled with joy and peace. He created man for happiness, and He longs to fill human hearts with the peace of heaven. He desires that the families below shall be a symbol of the great family above.

"But Israel did not fulfill God's purpose. The Lord declared, 'I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto Me?' Jer. 2:21. 'Israel is an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself.' Hosea 10:1. 'And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt Me and My vineyard. What could have been done more to My vineyard, that I have not done in it? Wherefore when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be

eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: and I will lay it waste; it shall not be pruned nor digged; but there shall come up briars and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For . . . He looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry.' Isa. 5:3-7."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 290, 291.

SUMMARY: Out of tragedy God brought good through the life that Naomi lived in a foreign land.

APPLICATION

God calls each one of us to represent Him before the world around us. We can let Him use us as Naomi did, or we can fail Him as sadly as did most of Israel. We are to represent God's loving Son. How will we respond?

We drink from wells we did not dig.



HEATHER AND JIM attend Columbia Union College. "We appreciate our Christian teachers," they say, "and the Christian philosophy that underlies every class."

Like thousands of Adventists before them, Heather and Jim drink from wells that they did not dig. They appreciate the sacrifice that built their school.

"That's one reason why we give to missions," they say. "We want to be part of the sacrifice that provides wells from which others may drink."

Dig Wells of Living Water in Jamaica This Quarter.

THIRTEENTH SABBATH OFFERING, DEC. 19

Back in Bethlehem

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ruth 1:19—2:23.



MEMORY TEXT: “The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust” (Ruth 2:12).

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Even as we struggle with doubt and discouragement, God is working out the solutions to our problems and needs.

OVERVIEW: Ruth 1:19—2:23

1:19-22 Return to Bethlehem	2:1-16 Ruth Gleans in Boaz's field	2:17-23 Ruth Returns with the Good News
Naomi's complaint against God	Ruth goes to glean (2:1-3) Boaz questions his servants about Ruth (2:4-7) Boaz speaks to Ruth (2:8-14); makes special provision for her (2:15, 16)	Ruth returns to Naomi with gleanings (2:17, 18) Naomi asks where Ruth gleaned (2:19) Naomi encourages Ruth to follow Boaz's instructions (2:20-23)

INTRODUCTION: Despite the fact that she had lived a life close to God—as shown by her impact on Ruth—Naomi came back to Bethlehem deeply troubled with doubt. She did not understand how God was working in her life. Her husband and sons were dead—the relationships that gave her value and self-worth in her own eyes and in that of her time and culture, had been cruelly severed. She had gone to Moab full of the things important to the life of an Israelite woman, but had come back empty (Ruth 1:21).

Ancient Israelites saw the hand of God active in every aspect of life. Everything that happened was under His direct control. Sharing this attitude, Naomi viewed the loss of her family as the Lord's doing. “The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me” (Ruth 1:21, NIV).

In the words of one author, Naomi “portrays herself as defendant in a legal action in which the charges and testimony are in effect unknown to her, in which she has been deemed guilty, in which punishment has already been meted out. Worst of all, her antagonist is God.”—Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth* (NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1975), p. 83.

Naomi put her agonizing questions in the form of a legal complaint. Terminology from the court of justice is much in evidence in the book of Ruth, building up to, and culminating in, the trial scene of chapter four.

But unknown to her, God already is beginning to work out His answer to her challenge, as becomes evident soon after her arrival in Bethlehem. Most important of all, Naomi (like Job) never lost her faith in God even as she questioned Him.



I. ARRIVAL IN BETHLEHEM (Ruth 1:19-22).

(When studying this lesson, read each Scripture portion carefully before responding to the study questions.)

Why do you think the women responded the way they did when they saw Naomi? Ruth 1:19.

The NIV translates verse 19, "So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, 'Can this be Naomi?' " Grief had taken its toll. She could no longer even stand to hear the sound of her name, which meant "pleasant." It seemed a mockery to be called that. "Call me Bitter," she told them, fighting back the sobs, "because the Almighty has made my life very bitter."

SEARCH AND LEARN: What relationship do Jeremiah 12:1-13 and Habakkuk 1:1-17 have to the great controversy between good and evil? How does this relationship help explain Naomi's questions?

THINK IT THROUGH: When does the struggle to understand the actions, or what seem to be the inactions of God, begin to shade into a denial of faith?

NOTES:



II. RUTH GLEANS IN BOAZ'S FIELD (Ruth 2:1-16).

1. Boaz Introduced (2:1-3).

What two factors mentioned in verse 1 bring Boaz into focus in this story?

How did the people of Ruth's day frequently refer to her? Ruth 2:2, 6, 21.

Deuteronomy 23:3 declares that “no Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation none belonging to them shall enter the assembly of the Lord for ever” (RSV). The Moabite opposition to the Israelites had created great hostility between the two peoples. But when it comes to salvation, God is no respecter of persons. Even God’s wrath is conditional. (See Hos. 11:9; Isa. 48:9; Eze. 18:21-28.)

What made it possible for Ruth to provide food for herself and Naomi? Ruth 2:2-3.

“The law of God gave the poor a right to a certain portion of the produce of the soil. When hungry, a man was at liberty to go to his neighbor’s field or orchard or vineyard, and eat of the grain or fruit to satisfy his hunger. It was in accordance with this permission that the disciples of Jesus plucked and ate of the standing grain as they passed through a field upon the Sabbath day.

“All the gleanings of harvest field, orchard, and vineyard, belonged to the poor. ‘When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field,’ said Moses, ‘and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it. . . . When thou beatest thine olive tree, thou shalt not go over the boughs again. . . . When thou gatherest the grapes of thy vineyard, thou shalt not glean it afterward: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow. And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt.’”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 531.



THINK IT THROUGH: What are some ways that we can translate God’s concern for disadvantaged people into action today?

ILLUMINATION: “Providence guided Ruth to the field of Boaz, one of her deceased husband’s near relatives. . . . How often, if we but knew, the circumstances and experiences of life that seem to ‘happen’ to us are in reality providential.”—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 434.

Notice that Ruth took the initiative in the gleaning. (See verse 2.)

2. Impressed with Ruth, Boaz Speaks Kindly to Her (Ruth 2:4-14).

The owner ordinarily gave permission for those wishing to glean to do so. Apparently Ruth started gleaning some time before Boaz appeared on the scene and asked permission of the servant in charge. In his defense for having given such permission, the servant pointed out her industriousness. The phrase “tarried a little in the house” in the King James Version of verse 7 is better understood as “without resting for a moment” (RSV).

Why did Boaz give the blessing that he bestowed on Ruth? Ruth 2:8-12.

Notice that Boaz blessed the Moabite woman immediately after he recited the deeds of loyalty and kindness she had shown to her mother-in-law. We see here another of the themes of the book of Ruth. Naomi, who has lived an exemplary life, has suffered tragedy. A good life does not automatically ensure unending blessings. Nor does the absence of visible blessings mean that a person is living under the frown of God. The book of Ruth shows us from another perspective how the child of God is to live and why.

“Human righteous acts do not incur God’s favor, they live out God’s favor. God’s people do acts of *Chesed* [loving kindness] not in order to deserve God’s grace, but in order to respond to His grace. God’s blessing is then a response to the response, one of which His people may be confident but of which they cannot be mechanically sure. To put it more directly with reference to Boaz’s blessing of Ruth, his words really are a prayer, a petition, and not a statement of doctrine.”—Campbell, *Ruth*, p. 113.

Ruth responded to Naomi’s love by returning it. Her response in turn received a promise of blessing. This is the key to the Christian life. We obey in response to the love *that God already has shown us*. When God asked the Hebrews to observe the Ten Commandments, it was to be in response to what He already had done: “I am the Lord your God, *who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage*” (Exodus 20:2, RSV, italics supplied). God already had saved them, now He asked them to respond to that salvation, and His blessing or curse would depend upon their response.

What does the continuing dialogue between Ruth and Boaz indicate about the kindness and graciousness of both parties? Ruth 2:13, 14.



3. Boaz Makes Special Provisions for Ruth (Ruth 2:15, 16).

What instructions did Boaz give to his laborers concerning Ruth?

The law called for Boaz to allow Ruth to glean in his fields. But he went beyond what was required. He asked his men to leave stalks of grain in the fields for her to find, and arranged for her safety. “‘Even if she gathers among the sheaves,’ ” he told them, “ ‘don’t embarrass her . . . don’t rebuke her’ ” (Ruth 2:15, 16, NIV). The love of those who know God’s love always goes beyond the minimum response required. It goes out of its way to do more, to protect the dignity and self-worth of those it helps. Divinely-inspired love is sensitive to the feelings as well as to the needs of others. We see this over and over in Jesus’ relationships to those around Him.

THINK IT THROUGH: How can we render services to our community in such a way that we protect and enhance people’s sense of self-worth?

SEARCH AND LEARN: Study carefully how Jesus treated Peter and Judas, noting particularly how Jesus did not expose Judas, but kept the door of salvation open to the very end. John 13:21-30 (particularly verses 28, 29).



REVIEW PICTURES



III. RUTH RETURNS WITH THE GOOD NEWS (Ruth 2:17-23).

How long did Ruth spend gleaning in the field? Compare verse 7 with verse 17.

“It seems that Ruth went back to her gleaning before the ‘young men’ returned to their harvesting. She worked longer than they did, and gleaning was not an easy task. . . .

“In the afternoon gleaning proved to be an easier task than in the morning. But Ruth did not on that account cease gleaning sooner. Only at even did she pause to beat out what she had gathered.”—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, pp. 435, 436.

What impression did Ruth’s unexpected report make on Naomi? Ruth 2:19, 20.

“Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. ‘The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz,’ she said.

“‘The Lord bless him!’ Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. ‘The Lord has not stopped showing His kindness to the living and the dead.’ She added, ‘That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers’ ” (Ruth 2:19, 20, NIV).

Naomi had lodged her complaint. Now she began to see the unfolding of

God's response to it. Boaz was a kinsman-redeemer. The Lord was working out their salvation. The kinsman-redeemer (Hebrew *goel*) "was a redeemer, a protector, a defender of the interests of the individual and of the group."—Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, vol. 1 (NY: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1961), p. 21. The kinsman-redeemer would buy the freedom of the Israelite who had to sell himself into slavery, and if, because of poverty, a person had to sell the land inherited from ancestors, the *goel* had first right to purchase it so as to keep it in the family. (See Lev. 25:24-49.) Jeremiah acted the part of the kinsman-redeemer in Jeremiah 32:6-9 when the prophet bought the field of his cousin Hanameel.

Eventually the term acquired a religious aspect. Scripture calls God a *goel* in such passages as Job 19:25; Psalms 19:14; 78:35; and Jeremiah 50:34. The Hebrew word "suggests a close personal relationship between redeemer and redeemed: it is thus appropriate of the God of the covenant."—R. Allan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 1973), p. 86. It is used frequently in the book of Isaiah to describe God's redemption of His people from Babylon. (See Isa. 41:14; 43:14; 44:6, 24; 49:7; 59:20; 63:16.)

THINK IT THROUGH: The kinsman-redeemer was bound by family ties to those he rescued. Do these same kinds of ties bind Jesus to us?



FURTHER STUDY AND MEDITATION: "Those who accept Christ as their personal Saviour are not left as orphans, to bear the trials of life alone. He receives them as members of the heavenly family; He bids them call His Father their Father. They are His 'little ones,' dear to the heart of God, bound to Him by the most tender and abiding ties. He has toward them an exceeding tenderness, as far surpassing what our father or mother has felt toward us in our helplessness as the divine is above the human.

"Of Christ's relation to His people, there is a beautiful illustration in the laws given to Israel. When through poverty a Hebrew had been forced to part with his patrimony, and to sell himself as a bondservant, the duty of redeeming him and his inheritance fell to the one who was nearest of kin. . . . So the work of redeeming us and our inheritance, lost through sin, fell upon Him who is 'near of kin' unto us. It was to redeem us that He became our kinsman. Closer than father, mother, brother, friend, or lover is the Lord our Saviour. 'Fear not,' He says, 'for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine.' 'Since thou wast precious in My sight, thou has been honorable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life.' Isaiah 43:1, 4.

"Christ loves the heavenly beings that surround His throne; but what shall account for the great love wherewith He has loved us? We cannot understand it, but we can know it true in our own experience. And if we do hold the relation of kinship to Him, with what tenderness should we regard those who are brethren and sisters of our Lord! Should we not be quick to recognize the claims of our divine relationship? Adopted into the family of God, should we not honor our Father and our kindred?"—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 327.

SUMMARY: Writhing in the pain of tragedy, Naomi lodged a complaint against God. But she did not let her questions destroy her faith. She clung

her trust in God. When God began to work out His response through the person of Boaz, she was able to recognize the hand of God in action.

APPLICATION

- Judy's life had reached the depths of despair and degradation. Then she discovered God's love for her, experienced what it meant to be saved by a merciful God. She could not stop telling others what He had done for her. God and life were now wonderfully good. Then one day someone close to her shattered her life again. Overwhelmed with shame for what the person had done, she could no longer face those to whom she had witnessed. Had God abandoned her? Would her faith in Him hold through the new trial?
- Each one of us may have to go through shattering experiences. Can we cling to God even though we will never know in this life why some things happen? We must face the questions that trouble our spiritual life, but we also must be willing to trust God even if we do not think we receive the answers we want. As we read in the Gospels about how Jesus dealt with those around Him and realize that He was demonstrating the love of the Father (John 14:8, 9), we know that we can safely and confidently place our trust in God. In our lives, as in that of Naomi, God still is in charge and at work.
- Does my personal testimony inspire others to want to enjoy the same relationship to God that I do?

We drink from wells we did not dig.



In a sense, we drink from wells that we did not dig," admit Heather and Jim, of Columbia Union College. "So do our counterparts at West Indies College, Jamaica. But at that 75-year-old institution, some of the wells need to be redug," they add.

Because of overcrowded facilities, for instance, Jamaican students may use their library only during hours scheduled for their class.

And just as "Isaac dugged again the wells of water, which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father" (Gen. 26:18), so Heather, Jim, and all of us may help build a new library at West Indies College.*

* Place your special gift in a tithe envelope and mark it Thirteenth Sabbath.

**Open the Wells of Learning at
West Indies College, Jamaica**

THIRTEENTH SABBATH OFFERING, DEC. 19

At the Threshing Floor

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ruth 3:1-18.



MEMORY TEXT: "I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I swear unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest mine" (Eze. 16:8).

CENTRAL THOUGHT: God seeks to bring His people into an intimate relationship with Him. This union with God often is symbolized in the Bible by the marriage relationship.

OVERVIEW: Ruth 3:1-18		
3:1-5	3:6-15	3:16-18
Naomi plans for Ruth's future	Ruth visits Boaz at the threshing floor	Ruth reports back to Naomi

INTRODUCTION: Metaphors and symbols help us to understand things that otherwise are difficult to grasp—or even to talk about. A powerful symbol always communicates more effectively than abstract words. Which gets across the concept of beauty better: a rose sparkling with dew, or an essay on the subject of beauty? Many things such as love, hope, or trust can best be defined through symbols and demonstration. We say, for example, that love is like something—then use a symbol to show what love is like.

Scripture, which God gave to us to reveal the most real things in the universe, abounds with symbols. The symbols help us to understand about the real God, His real character, and His real plans and hopes for us. One symbol that the Bible often uses to describe the relationship between God and humanity is that of marriage. In Ezekiel 16, the prophet employed an allegory that has God marrying His people. The book of Hosea expresses God's love for His wayward people through the symbol of married love. Marriage is a deep, intimate, permanent commitment between one person and another. The love, devotion, and concern one spouse has for the other but faintly reflects God's attitude toward us. But the symbol helps us to grasp His love much better than if we did not have the symbol.

The book of Ruth is a story of real human beings. It is not a mechanical allegory designed merely as a teaching device. Yet, in this account of people living under the sovereignty of God we catch glimpses of the God who is the source of their kindness, concern, mercy, and love for one another.

If God's people can act toward one another in this way even in a fallen world, how much more God can and does love us. The beautiful story of Ruth's marriage to Boaz is a powerful symbol of that greater marriage the Bridegroom longs to have with His people.

SUN**I. NAOMI PLANS FOR RUTH'S FUTURE (Ruth 3:1-5).**

As Naomi's complaint against God faded into the background she was caught up in watching the hand of God at work in the life of her daughter-in-law. But the people of the Bible were not passive individuals. They believed that God worked through their actions. Therefore Naomi began to plan how to implement what she saw as God's obvious will for Ruth.

What was the significance of the question found in Ruth 3:1 that Naomi addressed to her daughter-in-law?

The "rest" Naomi referred to was marriage. Two institutions of rest came out of Eden. One involved the *time* of rest—the Sabbath. The other involved the *place* of rest—the home.

THINK IT THROUGH: Knowing the psychology of human nature, Naomi instructed Ruth to wash and perfume herself and dress in her best clothes. Then the daughter-in-law was to wait until Boaz had eaten and gone to sleep after the hard day of harvesting. Is there anything wrong with employing psychological insights in leading people to do God's will? Does God expect us to do everything possible to smooth the way for the outworking of His will?

We should never employ questionable methods simply because they get results. But God expects His people to be tactful and to use proper motivating techniques in leading people to want to do His will. Jesus drew men and women to Him by His winning ways. He expects us to be just as gracious, tactful, and cultured.

Give concrete examples of what a person might say or do to influence others positively.

MON**II. AT THE THRESHING FLOOR (Ruth 3:6-15).****1. Naomi Guides Ruth in Proposing That Boaz Fulfill the Role of Kinsman-Redeemer (Ruth 3:1-9).**

The day had been a good one. The Lord had blessed the crops and the harvest had gone well. The mound of winnowed grain glowed in the mellow red-gold light of the setting sun. Tired from an honest day's work, and after enjoying a good meal, Boaz probably curled up in a tent pitched beside the piles of grain. He would spend the night at the threshing floor, guarding the

harvest. Nothing must happen to it. This grain insured the people's survival for another year.

Ruth had worked hard all day. She waited until Boaz had time to fall asleep in his tent. Then, in the darkness so that she would not be observed, she slipped into the tent. In the middle of the night, Boaz woke with a start. Instantly he realized that he was not alone—and the other person was a woman. "Who are you?" he asked in surprise.

" 'I am your servant Ruth,' she said. 'Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer' " (Ruth 3:9, NIV).

What was the significance of the expression *spreading of the skirt*?

" 'To cover with the skirt' means to take in marriage."—Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, pp. 237, 238. The spread robe was a symbol of the protection of marriage.—Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972), p. 156.

A similar custom of spreading the skirt—the hem of the robe-like garment—over a widow as a way of claiming her as a wife existed among some Arabs even into this century.

Ruth was proposing marriage to Boaz. Ancient near eastern cultures had a fundamental sense of the right way of doing things within each culture, and she properly followed the custom of her adopted Israelite culture. She now so identified with God's people that she had begun doing things the way the Israelites would. The Moabite widow was asking the kinsman-redeemer to fulfill the practice of levirate marriage.

In the patriarchal culture of her time, it must have taken some courage for Ruth to take the initiative in this matter. God asks us to fearlessly come to Him and ask Him to spread His skirt over us.

How does Ezekiel use this same imagery? What lesson is he attempting to teach by using it? Eze. 16:1-14.

Generally the Old Testament prophets used father-son imagery to express the relationship between Israel and God. But Ezekiel, Hosea, and Jeremiah had undergone such an experience of suffering and grief that they felt compelled to employ a different metaphor to portray their insight into God's love for His people.



What fundamental difference between the metaphor of father-son and that of marriage warns us that we cannot take our relationship with God for granted?

The imagery of marriage involves freedom to enter or to break such an intimate relationship. Only in the voluntary and intimate relationship of marriage could they find a way to illustrate God's astounding love for Israel.

THINK IT THROUGH: How do members of the church abuse their marriage relationship with the Bridegroom, Jesus?

What was the significance of Ruth's action in the light of her statement "for thou art a near kinsman"?

Not only was Ruth following Naomi's instructions, but the basis of her request was the law of the kinsman-redeemer. Boaz must have recognized that Ruth would not be aware of this law and custom. Thus he would recognize that Naomi was making this claim through Ruth. He considered it both right and honorable.

2. A Worthy Woman (Ruth 3:10, 11).

What was Boaz's reaction to Ruth's proposal? Ruth 3:10.

Apparently, based on such evidence as the similarity of the speech forms in the Hebrew language that the author of Ruth used for both Boaz and Naomi, Boaz was closer in age to the mother-in-law than to Ruth. The younger widow could have found a man nearer her age for a husband. But she wanted to do what was considered the right thing in her adopted culture. This called for her to marry a kinsman-redeemer from the family of her dead husband. For this Boaz blesses her and calls her a "worthy woman" ("a woman of noble character," Ruth 3:11, NIV).

WED **REVIEW** the poem of the "worthy woman" in Proverbs 31. (See lesson 1, p. 11.)

This beautiful poem outlines in practical detail some of the ways that life can be lived to the blessing of others. True religion consists not only of how we worship and believe, but also of how we live. Scripture honors Ruth as much for the life she led—the love she showed to Naomi and others through her loving and kind deeds—as for the fact that she chose to serve the God of Israel. In fact, choosing to worship the God of Israel meant choosing to live a life that reflected His gracious and merciful character. To be Christians today, we must live in a Christlike way.

What kind of things did Ruth do that led the townspeople of Bethlehem to understand that Ruth was a worthy or noble woman? Ruth 3:11.

3. A Complication Arises (Ruth 3:12-15).

What did Boaz explain had to be done before he could become Ruth's and Naomi's kinsman-redeemer? Verses 12, 13.

Boaz told Ruth that she need have no worry. He would do everything possible to work out the legal complications. His actions demonstrated his noble character.

How did Boaz indicate that he was concerned about protecting Ruth's reputation? Verse 14.

Boaz graciously gave her six measures of barley to take to Naomi (verse 15). Then he went to town to begin the legal arrangements to redeem Ruth and make her his wife.



III. RUTH REPORTS BACK TO NAOMI (Ruth 3:16-18).

With naturally intense interest, Naomi inquired, “ ‘How did it go, my daughter?’ ” (Ruth 3:16, NIV). After Ruth explained what had happened, the older woman replied, “ ‘Wait my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today’ ” (Ruth 3:18, NIV). She knew human nature—and if she recognized the hand of God behind the incident, she knew it would, indeed, be settled quickly. God had not explained the tragedies in Naomi's life, but now she could see His response of love being worked out in the events taking place around her.

Do you see any comparison between Ruth having to wait for Boaz to work out legal complications in order to redeem her and Christians having to wait today for Jesus to complete His work in heaven before He can come to redeem us from this world? If so, what comparisons would you make? What assurances does He give us?

The church consists of people—you and me. We are each in a relationship with Jesus that can be as intimate and committed and enduring as the ideal that the symbol stands for. If we will but let Jesus spread His skirt over us, we will know greater redemption and security than even Ruth experienced. Our Bridegroom is Jesus Himself.

ILLUMINATION: “Christ honored the marriage relation by making it also a symbol of the union between Him and His redeemed ones. He Himself is the Bridegroom; the bride is the church, of which, as His chosen one, He says, ‘Thou art all fair, My love; there is no spot in thee.’ ”—*The Adventist Home*, p. 26.

An image related to the robe of marriage is the wedding garment that people of Christ's time wore to the wedding itself. Jesus not only brings us into intimate relationship with Himself, He transforms us so that we can be happy in that relationship. The robe of His righteousness not only covers our imperfect characters, it transforms them. Both the images of the covering with the garment in marriage, and the garment to wear at the wedding give us glimpses of the reality that Jesus has in store for each one of us.



FURTHER STUDY AND MEDITATION: “God is the husband of His church. The church is the bride, the Lamb’s wife. Every true believer is a part of the body of Christ. Christ regards unfaithfulness shown to Him by His people as the unfaithfulness of a wife to her husband. We are to remember that we are members of Christ’s body.”—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 985, 986.

“Then, children, come to Jesus. Give to God the most precious offering that it is possible for you to make; give Him your heart. He speaks to you saying, ‘My son, my daughter, give me thine heart. Though your sins be as scarlet, I will make them white as snow; for I will cleanse you with my own blood. I will make you members of my family—children of the heavenly King. Take my forgiveness, my peace which I freely give you. I will clothe you with my own righteousness,—the wedding garment,— and make you fit for the marriage supper of the Lamb. When clothed in my righteousness, through prayer, through watchfulness, through diligent study of my Word, you will be able to reach a high standard. You will understand the truth, and your character will be molded by a divine influence; for this is the will of God, even your sanctification’ ”—Ellen G. White Comments, *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1162.

SUMMARY: The incident at the threshing floor gives us assurance of God’s desire for our salvation. Boaz would not stop until he had redeemed Ruth, and neither will our heavenly Kinsman-Redeemer. Jesus longs to take us home with Him. Naomi thought she had come back from Moab “empty” (Ruth 1:21). Boaz gave her a token of barley to assure her that she was no longer empty (Ruth 3:17). Jesus has given us many tokens that our spiritual condition is being filled even as Naomi’s was. As the Holy Spirit fills the void created by sin, we can know that in His own good time, our joy will be replete and overflowing. The book of Ruth teaches us to recognize that the Christian is to experience great joy. As did Ruth, we wait in anticipation of the day when the Bridegroom is to bring us to the wedding feast.

APPLICATION

- In this week’s lesson we find as we do throughout the book of Ruth, assurance of our salvation, mingled with a demonstration and call for godly living. The book of Ruth shows us how the godly life that Jesus makes possible for us can be lived. This little book presents a glowing illustration of faith in action.
- What have I learned from this lesson that can make me a stronger Christian?
- What have I learned from this lesson that can make me a more helpful member of my family?
- What have I learned from this lesson that will make me a more supportive member of my church family?
- What have I learned from this lesson that will make me a more successful soul winner?

Justice at the Gate

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ruth 4:1, 2, plus selected texts.



MEMORY TEXT: “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth” (Jer. 23:5).

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Scripture speaks of salvation in terms of justice and judgment. The legal imagery the Bible uses comes from the customs and practices of Israelite culture. Many Christians tend to view these images through the modern legal systems with which they are most familiar—especially those aspects dealing with criminal justice. Because of this, they often fear God’s judgment instead of finding it a comfort. When we realize that judgment’s goal is to meet our needs and to save us, we will find in the concept of judgment one of the most comforting assurances the Christian can have.

OVERVIEW:

- I. The Court at the Gate (Ruth 4:1, 2).
- II. Reconciliation—Not Punishment.
- III. Judgment in the New Testament.

INTRODUCTION: When we hear the words *justice* and *judgment* we automatically think of punishment. To many in our day, justice is getting exactly what is deserved. Because we know that our lives have been sinful, we do not look forward to judgment. We associate punishment with it. In Old Testament times people viewed the idea of judgment quite differently. They looked forward to it, even urging God to judge them.

The headline-catching part of the modern legal system in most of the world is that concerned with criminal justice. Unfortunately, this legal emphasis on finding guilt and of determining if laws and regulations have been broken can be carried over into our religious lives.

You may be wondering what the hearing to transfer the right to marry Ruth from one kinsman to another has to do with our understanding of the doctrine of the judgment. In most cases of modern legal justice, Ruth’s case would be a “civil” matter rather than a “criminal” one. But “civil” and “criminal” are modern categories that do not fit the way people thought in the biblical world.

Biblical courts were not obsessed with punishment as modern criminal justice seems to be. Ancient courts existed to solve problems, whether they might be boundary disputes or what we would today call “criminal” acts. They sought resolutions that would restore harmony to the parties or the community caught up in such problems.

Boaz sought to be Ruth’s kinsman-redeemer. He worked through the legal

system of his time, a system of justice that Bible writers have used as the imagery to portray how Jesus, humanity's Kinsman-Redeemer, has been resolving the problem of restoring fallen men and women to harmony with the unfallen universe. Because the Old Testament doctrine of judgment and divine justice expresses itself through the images of Israelite justice, we must understand how that ancient system operated in order that we not misinterpret what the Bible says or miss anything that Scripture teaches. Once we catch the positive spirit of the Israelite court, we will be better able to grasp the positive assurances that God meant to communicate to us through Scripture's use of this imagery. Chapter four of the book of Ruth has some wonderful things to tell us about our heavenly Kinsman-Redeemer. We must be prepared to understand that message.

I. THE COURT AT THE GATE (Ruth 4:1, 2).

What did Boaz do as soon as he returned to Bethlehem?

The gates of the walled cities were important gathering places where business dealings were transacted and the community's legal proceedings took place. Biblical towns had no special buildings set aside as courthouses, but used the open spaces at the gates. At some archeological sites stone benches have been found in the walls lining the gates. These apparently provided seats for those engaged in business or legal activities. Throughout Scripture we find reference to law courts at the gates. (See, for example, Deut. 21:19; Isa. 29:21; Amos 5:10; Zech. 8:16.)

After Boaz found the nearer kinsman, he must have asked him to help select the panel of judges who would take their official seats in order to make a legal decision.

ILLUMINATION: "The procedure followed was most democratic. The case was clear, a decision was reached on the basis of Mosaic law without delay, and the decision was confirmed and witnessed by a representative group of the recognized leading men of Bethlehem. Legal business was thus settled without lawyers and without extended legal arguments."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 442.

Not only have archeologists found evidence of low stone benches along the walls of the city gates of ancient Israel, but they have found an instance or two of the remains of a thronelike chair located at the gates. The kings of Israel and of Judah at one time sat on thrones in an open area "in the entrance of the gate of Samaria" (1 Kings 22:10). King Zedekiah occupied a seat "in the gate of Benjamin" (Jer. 38:7).

What did Absalom do at the gate of Jerusalem as part of his campaign to woo the affections of the people away from his father? 2 Sam. 15:2-4.

In Absalom's claim to want to bring justice to the people he was undermining the system of justice in the land. Absalom not only desired to be a

judge, but he also was subverting Israelite justice as it was known by the people. For most of their history the people of Israel did not have a widespread system of government courts or professional lawyers and judges. The king might act as judge in the capital of the country, but this was not the case elsewhere. The judges depicted in the biblical book of that name “were primarily the ‘saviours’ or ‘deliverers’ of their people from their enemies.”—Arthur E. Cundall, *Judges: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), p. 15. They were not judicial officials in the modern sense.



What did Amos mean when he proclaimed, “Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate” in Amos 5:15 (RSV)?

In Old Testament justice practices legal proceedings were informal and community-oriented. Besides the police function, the Israelite court performed a large number of what we would today consider social or welfare services. It acted as arbitrator for disputes and quarrels. The court also mediated or officiated on such questions as those involving inheritance, marriage, and business. A villager could take to it any aggravation or friction that was upsetting the villager’s peace and harmony or that of the community.

ILLUSTRATION: Let us look at how the court operated. Suppose two villagers get into a dispute over stolen livestock or an altered boundary line. Unable to come to an agreement between them, they hurry to the open area by the city gate. As did Boaz, they round up the available male citizens to form a legal assembly. The act of appealing for justice is what brings the court into existence. Unlike modern courts, the Israelite court was not a permanent thing. It did not exist before the moment it was needed, and would disband at the conclusion of the case. It would re-form only when a need arose again. (Based on Hans Jochen Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East* [Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980], pp. 33, 34.)

Who were qualified to serve as judges? Deut. 19:12; 25:7.

The elders were leading citizens or heads of families in the tribal clans, not a professional class. Some scholars visualize a more structured system of courts and judges during later Jewish history, especially as Greek and Roman influences permeated the country. But even that would not be comparable to the complex legal systems we find in most countries today.



II. RECONCILIATION—NOT PUNISHMENT.

Standing before the assembled group of elders and the audience of fellow villagers, the plaintiff or accuser would state his case, and the defendant or other party would present his side. The impromptu court could summon witnesses to determine or verify the facts.

What was the minimum of witnesses needed to establish the facts? Deut. 17:6.

After he had testified, a witness who was an elder could then apparently also act as a judge. Even an accuser could act as judge. (Based on Hans Jochen Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East*, pp. 34, 35.)

The informal nature of the Israelite court system is puzzling to those who are used to a more sharply defined structure. It is hard to imagine a case where one person could in turn be witness and judge, plaintiff and judge, or all three in succession. But that is the only way we can understand some of the legal imagery found in the Bible.

As in modern trials, either party might offer physical evidence. A herdsman accused of losing an animal had to support his claim that a predator took it by producing the mangled remains. (See Ex. 22:13.)

After each side had stated its case, the plaintiff, defendant, and elders would stand. Then the latter would declare a verdict of guilt or innocence, or issue a solution to resolve the dispute between the plaintiff and defendant. However, the verdict was not for the purpose of punishing so much as it provided a way to work out bringing the dispute or problem to an end and the two parties back together.

What would a court do instead of imprisoning a thief? Ex. 22:1.

Even the execution of a murderer took place not so much because he had broken a law, but in order to release the tension between the family or tribe of the victim and the murderer's own clan. Unless the loss was immediately balanced, a blood feud could take place. If it did, it could spread until it wiped out entire families or clans. The main goal of Israelite justice was not punishment or removing criminals from the street, but reconciliation between the estranged parties.

ILLUMINATION: One writer has called the village court of Israel "the organization for reconciliation" whose purpose was to "settle quarrels and guard the well-being of the community."—L. Kohler, quoted in Hans Jochen Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East*, pp. 37, 38.

"In the Bible, a judge is not merely a person who has the cognitive facility to examine a case and to pronounce a sentence; he is also a person who is pained and distressed when injustice is done."—Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), vol. 2, p. 63.

THINK IT THROUGH: Do you see any parallels between the way the Israelite court operated and the way the great controversy is being resolved? Both God and human beings are on trial before the universe.



The goal of the Israelite court was to see that problems were solved, to provide help, and to resolve difficulties. Each person in Israelite society had been given certain rights by God. The responsibility of the court was to see that those coming before them received their God-given rights. For example, because widows and orphans had no family to support them, they were guaranteed the right to be supported by the community. If the community ignored its responsibility, the widow or orphan could summon a court into session to see that justice was done. Thus an Israelite who had a problem naturally turned to the court at the gate to solve it.

ILLUMINATION: Abraham Heschel explained that “justice in the Bible must not be taken in a legal sense as the administration of law according to the rules of law by a judge.” Rather it is “an interpersonal relationship, involving a claim and a responsibility, a right and a duty” which applies “to both God and man.”—*The Prophets*, vol. 1, p. 210.

The downtrodden, the afflicted, and those suffering trials in Israel would look forward in a special way to judgment of this kind. They knew that the court existed to help them, not to terrorize them. The courts at the gate were not impersonal. Instead, those sitting in judgment were their fellow townspeople who knew the plaintiffs and their needs. This type of court particularly illustrates God’s love for us.

How can Christians today apply the God-given principles and practices of the Israelite court to some of the problems that local congregations face?

Read Psalm 7:8. How could the Psalmist so confidently plead for God to judge him?

How David, of all people, could make a statement such as the one found in Psalm 7:8 puzzles most of us today.

God’s justice seeks to meet needs and solve problems. It is designed to satisfy the desperate needs of the fallen sinner. God longs to solve the problem of the separation that sin has created between lost humanity and Himself. Just as widows and orphans could go to court to obtain the things they needed for life in ancient Israel, the people of modern Israel can obtain what they need for eternal life from God’s court.



III. JUDGMENT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

If the New Testament writers seem a little more concerned with the punishment aspect of judgment, it is because they lived in a world that felt the need for criminal justice. Palestine was suffering the results of a long history of injustice, and crime was becoming rampant.

What happened when Rehoboam rejected the advice of the elders who served as judges in the community courts? 1 Kings 12:6-16.

As the influence of pagan religions increased, wealth and power began to gather into the hands of a few rich landowners—totally contrary to God’s plan for His people. Along with spiritual and moral decay came a breakdown of the justice system. Bribery and dishonest practices spread through the courts. Amos and other prophets appealed for respect for justice “at the gate” (Amos 5:10, 12, 15; Zech. 8:16), but the trend did not stop. By the time of Christ the vast majority of the population toiled in abject poverty with little hope for justice. The Herodian and Roman governments overshadowed or partially displaced the community courts, but the people still remembered their ideals and promise.

SEARCH AND LEARN: Study the following references, then summarize in your own words what Jesus taught about judgment:

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Matt. 5:21. | 4. Luke 12:2. |
| 2. Matt. 12:36, 37. | 5. John 9:39. |
| 3. Matt. 23:23. | 6. John 16:8, 11. |

To the suffering multitudes of the first century of the Christian era, some of the New Testament statements about the wicked receiving their due must have been reassuring. In a world where many people still equated material prosperity with evidence of God’s favor, Jesus’ words in Matthew 25:31-46 must have encouraged Christians. God had not abandoned them. Their heavenly Father loved them just as much as He did those whose lives displayed material prosperity.

The New Testament continues the understanding of judgment as something to be longed for and prayed for. It offers the only solution to the problem of evil in this world. It is the Christian’s hope as well as that of the men and women of the Old Testament.

What attitude should Christians take concerning the judgment? 1 John 4:17.

NOTES:



FURTHER STUDY AND MEDITATION: Study what Paul says about the judgment in the texts that follow: Rom. 14:7, 10, 12; 1 Cor. 3:8, 13.

“In the judgment of the universe, God will stand clear of blame for the existence or continuance of evil. It will be demonstrated that the divine decrees are not accessory to sin. There was no defect in God’s government, no cause for disaffection.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 58.

“Those whom Christ commends in the judgment may have known little of theology, but they have cherished His principle. Through the influence of the divine Spirit they have been a blessing to those about them.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 638.

SUMMARY: The Israelites viewed the court at the gate as guaranteeing the protection of their rights, security, and place in society. It brought them help when they needed it and saw that justice was done and preserved. The court was not a distant and frightening thing, but a fundamental part of everyday life. The goal of each court session was to bring restoration and reconciliation to God’s people. When it operated according to His plan, it provided a beautiful image of God’s love for humanity and an illustration of the value of God’s final judgment.

APPLICATION

- Heaven’s court is friendly to God’s people because the Judge is on their side. With Jesus as my Judge, do I need to worry about whether He will be able to save me? On the other hand, do I need to take specific steps to make sure that my sins are forgiven and that I am overcoming sin by His grace and power?
- In the light of the fact that we are living in the last moment of the final judgment hour what should I do to help my relatives and friends prepare to stand in the judgment?

NOTES:

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The Redemption of Ruth

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ruth 4:3-12.



MEMORY TEXT: "For thy Maker is thine husband; the Lord of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel; The God of the whole earth shall he be called" (Isa. 54:5).

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Through the practical illustration of the hearing at the gate of Bethlehem God assures us of the salvation brought to us by another Kinsman from Bethlehem.

OVERVIEW: Ruth 4:3-12

4:3, 4	4:5-6	4:7-12
Other kinsman offered chance to redeem land; initially accepts	Other kinsman declines when he learns he must marry Ruth	Boaz redeems Ruth

INTRODUCTION: In the last lesson we studied some of the background of justice in the Bible so that we might be able to appreciate more fully the events described in Ruth 4. This week we will study what happened during the hearing at the gate.

Boaz invited the other and nearer kinsman to sit on one of the low benches that were located at the gate. Then both requested ten elders to sit with them. By doing this Boaz was convening a court hearing. Its goal would be to restore Ruth's security and her dead husband's name in the land. The hearing would decide whether Boaz or the other kinsman would perform the role of kinsman-redeemer.

Many married couples learn to sense God's love for them more fully after the birth of their children. Their love for their children grows in response to the unfolding of their lives. But as much as they love them, that love can be but the faintest reflection of the love that Jesus and the Father have for all of us. We never can outlove God. The warmth of the love that grew between Boaz and Ruth only hints at the infinitely greater love and effort that God expends in our behalf.

In the same way that each incident of parental or marital love points to the unfathomable depths of the love of our heavenly Father and of our Bridegroom and Saviour, the story of Boaz's intervention for Ruth reminds us of the incomprehensible effort that heavenly justice is putting forth for us. The book of Ruth presents the gospel story in miniature. The court hearing in the

fourth chapter is an acting out of what God has in mind for each one of us on a greater and eternal scale.



I. THE NEXT OF KIN (Ruth 4:3, 4).

What did Boaz tell the nearer kinsman? Why do you suppose that he did not present the entire story?

There are many details in this account that puzzle us today, although they must have been plain to the book's readers when it first was written. We do not know why the nearer kinsman is not named. Some have suggested that this was done to spare the man and his descendants embarrassment. Others have concluded that not naming him was a literary device intended to show that his name was unimportant to the message of the story. Nor do we understand fully how Naomi could offer the land for sale because normally, a widow did not inherit her husband's land. Perhaps the property was considered the joint property of her two deceased sons, Chilion and Mahlon, and she was acting as the guardian of their rights. Further, the book of Ruth has not previously mentioned Naomi having any direct contact with Boaz to tell him that the land was available for redemption.

Nevertheless such questions do not prevent our understanding what was taking place. Boaz was offering the other relative the opportunity to fulfill a highly honored and respected role in Israelite society—that of acting the part of a kinsman-redeemer.

THINK IT THROUGH: What are we doing with the opportunities God gives us to be saviors to others, both in the physical sense of meeting material needs and in the sense of being bearers of the message of the Gospel?

Why was it important that a kinsman should redeem Elimelech's land?

ILLUMINATION: "The importance attached to preventing property from passing out of the family seems strange to us, but the law provided that a family's property should not be permanently alienated. If a man was hard up he might raise money by disposing of his land, but he could do this only as a temporary measure, and when things improved he had the right to 'redeem' his land, *i.e.*, buy it back again. If he were totally unable to do this one of his kinsmen could do it. If none of his family could do it for him then it was provided that the land should return to him in 'the year of jubilee' (Lv. 25:28). The basic principle is laid down in these words: 'The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me. And in all the land of your possession ye shall grant a redemption for the land' (Lv. 25:23, 24, AV). . . . We see the firmness with which this might be upheld in the refusal of Naboth to dispose of 'the inheritance of my fathers' (1 Ki. 21:3) even to the king. A family's right to its own land was inalienable. All this lies behind the present chapter. Naomi was poor and

could not retain her land. But it was a solemn family obligation to see that the land was not lost.”—Leon Morris, *Ruth, an Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), p. 302.

MON

SEARCH AND LEARN: How did ignoring the principle of special care for the widows and the poor later bring hardship and disaster upon God’s people?

Eze. 22:25, 29, 31 _____

Zech. 7:9-14 _____

Mal. 3:5 _____

● How did the New Testament church relate to the question of caring for widows?

Acts 9:39 _____

1 Tim. 5:4, 16 _____

James 1:27 _____

II. AN OPPORTUNITY REJECTED (Ruth 4:5, 6).

What was the kinsman’s first response to Boaz’s request for him to redeem Elimelech’s land? Verse 4.

ILLUMINATION: “Should the nearer kinsman decide to purchase the property, it was his privilege to do so. Boaz would be without recourse. . . . After setting forth the facts and recognizing the rights of the nearer kinsman, Boaz clearly reveals his personal interest in the matter. He expresses hope that the nearer kinsman will not purchase the property.”—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 442.

TUE

How did the nearer kinsman react when Boaz mentioned the matter of Ruth?

The nearer relative could have changed his mind for a number of reasons. Perhaps at first he felt that the income from the land would more than meet the expense of providing for the widow Naomi. Then the fact of Ruth entered the picture. “Evidently he had no children of his own to inherit his property. If he should marry Ruth, the first child he might have by her would be counted as the children of Ruth’s deceased husband. Then both the parcel of land that he might buy from Naomi, and also the kinsman’s own property, could pass to Ruth’s children.”—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 443.

It is easy to condemn the near kinsman for refusing to redeem Ruth. But that is not the point here. In all likelihood, the author wants us to see something

more. The near relative acted as a sensible and normal person would respond in such a situation. He felt that redeeming Ruth would result in financial loss. His reaction must have been expected by Boaz. But “ ‘normal’ responsibility is not enough here.”—Edward Campbell, *Ruth*, p. 159.



What does the other kinsman’s response indicate about Boaz’s character and sense of responsibility?

Boaz showed greater than normal caring. In that sense he represents the greater Redeemer. Jesus always sought the ultimate demonstration of love. He risked all that He had for us. God never stops at just what has to be done. Love always goes beyond what merely is required. Ruth had shown more than the expected love for Naomi. Now the daughter-in-law received such love herself. Living and loving under the sovereignty of God, Ruth and Boaz demonstrated what it means to live and love as God would in their situation.



III. RUTH REDEEMED (Ruth 4:7-12).

How did the other kinsman symbolize his transfer of the right to redeem the land and to marry Ruth to Boaz? Verse 8.

“In early days the transfer of property was ratified by a symbolic action. According to [Ruth] 4:7, it was once the custom in Israel to validate all transactions in this way: one of the parties removed his sandal and gave it to the other. This action performed before witnesses, signified the abandon-

ment of a right. Naomi's first *go'el* [kinsman-redeemer] in this way renounces his right of pre-emption in favor of Boaz [Ruth] 4:8; the brother-in-law who declines the moral obligation of the levirate has his shoe removed [Deut. 25:9-10]; he is dispossessed of the right he had over his brother's widow. The shoe seems to have served as a probative instrument in transfers of land: in [Ps. 60:8; 108:9], the phrase 'over Edom I cast my sandal' implies taking possession. At Nuzu, the seller lifted his foot off the ground he was selling, and placed the buyer's foot on it. Here, too, a pair of shoes (and a garment) appears as a fictitious payment to validate certain irregular transactions. This may explain, in [Amos] 2:6, 8:6, the poor man who is sold, or bought, for a pair of sandals: he has been unjustly dispossessed, while the exaction has been given a cloak of legality."—Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, vol. 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1965), p. 169.

What seemed more important to Boaz than the purchase of the property? Ruth 4:10.

A child born to Ruth would perpetuate her dead husband's name in the land. This was something extremely important to the Hebrew mind. Notice that Boaz calls Ruth "the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon" (verse 10, RSV). As a foreigner and a widow, she belongs to two classes that God called for His people to care for in a special way. In Ruth 2:12, Boaz had prayed for her that " 'The Lord recompense you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!' " (RSV). Now that reward and protection is to be provided her through Boaz. That is the way God works—through His people. He employs our hearts and hands to perform His miracles. Throughout the book of Ruth we see God working through human beings, individuals whose actions of love reflect His character of love.



What unique comparisons did the elders make when pronouncing their blessing upon the forthcoming marriage? Ruth 4:11, 12.

The audience watching the hearing joined in with the elders in witnessing the transfer of the right to be kinsman-redeemer. Then the elders called down a blessing upon Ruth: that she follow the example of Rachel and Leah and have many children, building up the people of Israel. Children, particularly sons, were regarded as a great blessing from God, a sign of His favor. "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them!" (Psalm 127:3-5, RSV).

The people hoped that the marriage of Boaz and Ruth would " 'be like the house of Pharez, whom Tamar bore to Judah' " (Ruth 4:12).

Read Genesis 38:1-26. In the light of what we have studied about levirate marriage and family responsibility among the Israelites, how could Judah say of Tamar after what she had done, " 'She is more righteous than I' "? Gen. 38:26.

THINK IT THROUGH: In the book of Ruth, we have encountered some customs that may seem strange to us. Most cultures today do not follow the practice of levirate marriage. But the principle of responsibility to others, especially to the unfortunate and the disadvantaged, still remains. The Christian is called to aid the widows, orphans, and all those who need help of any kind. The Christian family of God is to be of even greater importance in the lives of today's people of God than was the tribal and family relationships of His people in the past. What can I do to recognize my family responsibility to the people of God and help those in my church who need special help?

The court at the gate witnessed the transaction between Boaz and the other near kinsman. The hearing was concluded. Justice triumphed. In the same way, divine justice will triumph for those who trust in Jesus, their Kinsman-Redeemer.

NOTES:



FURTHER STUDY AND MEDITATION: "The Lord declared to Israel: 'The land shall not be sold forever: for the land is Mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with Me.' Leviticus 25:23. The people were to be impressed with the fact that it was God's land which they were permitted to possess for a time; that He was the rightful owner, the original proprietor, and that He would have special consideration made for the poor and the unfortunate. It was to be impressed upon the minds of all that the poor have as much right to a place in God's world as have the more wealthy.

"Such were the provisions made by our merciful Creator, to lessen suffering, to bring some ray of hope, to flash some gleam of sunshine, into the life of the destitute and distressed.

"The Lord would place a check upon the inordinate love of property and power. Great evils would result from the continued accumulation of wealth by one class, and the poverty and degradation of another. Without some restraint the power of the wealthy would become a monopoly, and the poor, though in every respect fully as worthy in God's sight, would be regarded and treated as inferior to their more prosperous brethren. The sense of this oppression would arouse the passions of the poorer class. There would be a feeling of despair and desperation which would tend to demoralize society and open the door to crimes of every description. The regulations that God established were designed to promote social equality. The provisions of the sabbatical year and the jubilee would, in a great measure, set right that which during the interval had gone wrong in the social and political economy of the nation.

"These regulations were designed to bless the rich no less than the poor. They would restrain avarice and a disposition for self-exaltation, and would cultivate a noble spirit of benevolence; and by fostering good will and confidence between all classes, they would promote social order, the stability of

government. We are all woven together in the great web of humanity, and whatever we can do to benefit and uplift others will reflect in blessing upon ourselves. The law of mutual dependence runs through all classes of society. The poor are not more dependent upon the rich than are the rich upon the poor. While the one class ask a share in the blessings which God has bestowed upon their wealthier neighbors, the other need the faithful service, the strength of brain and bone and muscle, that are the capital of the poor.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 534, 535.

SUMMARY: God established a system of support among His people that was designed to protect all in the web of humanity. It had provisions to relieve suffering and hardship, to guard the inheritance of land that He had given to each Israelite family, and even to protect the rights of the strangers in their midst. The court at the gate and the role of kinsman-redeemer provided additional protection. But even more, they hinted at a coming Kinsman-Redeemer who would bring final and permanent justice; not only relieving, but eventually abolishing all suffering by destroying its source—sin.

APPLICATION

- Ellen White writes that “the principles set forth in Deuteronomy for the instruction of Israel are to be followed by God’s people to the end of time.”—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 570. We have seen how some of those principles were put into practice in the book of Ruth.
- How can I acknowledge God’s rulership and live out His will for me as lovingly as did Boaz and Ruth?

NOTES:**Thank You for Remembering**

The needs of children’s Sabbath Schools in Jamaica and Costa Rica as you give to the **Thirteenth Sabbath Offering** on **December 19**.

A Son Is Born

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ruth 4:13-22.



MEMORY TEXT: "The women said unto Naomi, Blessed be the Lord, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman" (Ruth 4:14).

CENTRAL THOUGHT: We may not understand all that happens in our lives, but we can know that there is a Redeemer who is in charge. Trust and faith in Him will enable us to live lives that reflect His will. With Jesus as our Saviour, we have nothing to fear.

OVERVIEW: Ruth 4:13-22		
4:13	4:14-16	4:17-22
A Son for Ruth	A Grandson for Naomi	Ancestor of David

INTRODUCTION: In the book of Ruth we have found three major threads running through its beautiful tapestry: the question of why God permits tragedy to strike those who love Him, the promise of a Redeemer, and examples of the way His people should live with one another and with the people among whom they live. The book of Ruth does not deal with these issues directly, but provides us with examples of real people coming to grips with the situations of human life, and doing so in the context of being followers of God who seek to know His ways. In their response we find strength and confidence for our own lives. The Bible more often shows than tells. It shows us people who trust God even when they do not understand why things happen to them or to those whom they love. Scripture portrays individuals living out their faith and confidence in their Lord. If they, living under stresses and problems, could safely let God be the Sovereign of their lives, so can we. After all, they were men and women like us.

Naomi did not know the cause of the tragedy that had devastated her life. Neither did Job. But, because of their experiences, we know a little more about the struggle between good and evil that we call the great controversy. Naomi believed in the promise of the future Kinsman-Redeemer. We live in the reality of His redemption. But there is one thing that she did come to know—the experience of a trusting, deep relationship with God.

The book of Ruth not only brings us a fascinating love story but it also presents a story of love in action, on both the divine and human levels. The loving God is seen putting His love into action. The response of love in the daily lives of His people also is featured.



I. A SON FOR RUTH (Ruth 4:13).

In the terse style so characteristic of Scripture, the author of the book now tells how Boaz, having legally acquired the right to redeem Ruth, marries her.

Ruth's marriage to Mahlon had been childless. Now she bore a son. The people of the Old Testament considered children to be a blessing from God, and a son a special blessing.

To whom does the Bible attribute Ruth's being able to conceive her son?

This is one of the few places where the book of Ruth portrays direct involvement by God in the events of the story. (See also Ruth 1:6.)

ILLUMINATION: "The Hebrew people recognized the fact that all life comes from God, and that He is the giver of 'every good and every perfect gift' (James 1:17; cf. John 3:27). It is He who 'gave us rain from heaven, and the fruitful seasons' (Acts 14:17; see also Deut. 11:14) and 'power to get wealth' (Deut. 8:17, 18). We should ever recognize God as the one from whom all our blessings flow and to whom our gratitude should ascend."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 444.

SEARCH AND LEARN: What echoes of the birth of another Child in Bethlehem do we find in Ruth 4:13? In the references that follow pick out those phrases that indicate how the Holy Spirit gave conception to Jesus:

Matt. 1:18, 20 _____

Luke 1:31-35 _____



II. A GRANDSON FOR NAOMI (Ruth 4:14-16).

How did the women of the village congratulate the new grandmother?

The women apparently were a group of friends who were present at the circumcision of the baby when he was given his name. (See verse 17.) They recognized in the birth evidence of the hand of the Lord. "Our author does not go out of his way to stress the divine activity. . . . But it is basic to him that God is over all men and all things, and that He brings His plans to pass. So in this book now and then an expression of this sort allows us to see that it is God who is the principal participant. He it is who has given Naomi the blessing."—Leon Morris, *Ruth, an Introduction and Commentary* (Donners Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), p. 313.

THINK IT THROUGH: Why is it sometimes hard for us to see the hand of God in our lives?

What did the women predict that the new grandson would come to mean to Naomi? Ruth 4:15.

Notice the praise given Ruth. Sons were highly honored in ancient societies, while daughters were often less regarded. In Gentile cultures, girl babies many times were cast aside to die. Even Jewish parents might be disappointed at the birth of a female infant. One ancient Jewish writer mentioned the sorrow some felt at the arrival of a girl child. But in this verse, Ruth is considered to be of more value than seven sons.

COMPARE the women's statement that Ruth was of more value than seven sons with what Elkanah said in his rather clumsy attempt to comfort Hannah recorded in 1 Samuel 1:8.

The women recognized the worth of a life of loving action. Ruth came from a people that had long been enemies of the Hebrews, but she reflected the love of the God she had chosen to follow. For this the women of Bethlehem honored her.



What must Naomi have learned about God from this experience?

Naomi earlier (Ruth 1:13, 20, 21) had lodged a complaint against God. As Edward Campbell, Jr., reminds us, "Complaint in the Bible regularly amounts to bringing a formal case against God. It calls his fairness and faithfulness into question."—Edward Campbell, Jr., *Ruth*, p. 167. The people of the Bible were not afraid to question God's actions. Job, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk protested, asking God to explain why He did or permitted certain things. But, unlike the book of Job, the book of Ruth does not reveal insights into why God allowed tragedy to come to Naomi. Both Job and Naomi had to learn to live without knowing why such tragic events had been allowed to enter their God-fearing lives.

ILLUMINATION: "Naomi, like Job . . . is rendered bereft of those things which provide her security and she cannot comprehend why. . . . These two characters in Old Testament stories are parallel, and the audience is meant to ask the question 'Why?' with them. As in Job, there will be resolutions of the calamities, but not a final answer to the question 'Why?'"—Edward Campbell, *Ruth*, p. 167.

In time we shall see that God has had good reasons for postponing the answer to our questions. But until then "what resolution there is comes in terms of renewed vocations for the persons involved. The only assurance is that the faithful God is, in spite of all appearances, still about his business, and his people should be about theirs. Elijah complains (1 Kings 19:1-14) and gets a new set of tasks (19:15-18); Jeremiah complains (Jer. 15:10-18, among several instances in Jeremiah 10-20) and is called anew (15:19-21);

Job complains, indeed hammers upon the closed door of [God's] courtroom, and gets no satisfying response, but only the assurance that God is still in charge of the cosmos and an unexpected assignment—to pray for his unhelpful comforters (Job 42:8; notice 42:10).”—Campbell, *Ruth*, pp. 167, 168.

ILLUSTRATION: Like Job, Naomi, who lost her sons in Moab, received a new “son.” Her assignment from God was to love and care for him. In turn he would bring blessing and happiness into her life.

We would not have such a hard time struggling with the unanswered questions of life if we were busy doing loving things for others. Those who come to share God's love often arrive at an understanding of why love must permit certain things to happen. A loving parent soon realizes that sometimes the most loving thing that can be done for a child may hurt the child for a period of time. But such love has an ultimate goal that, in the end, brings greater happiness and good.

THINK IT THROUGH: What is my reaction when life presents me with problems that make it difficult for me to recognize God's love?

- Think of some time in your life when tragedy struck. How did God work things out for you?

To what fundamental fact did Job cling in order to preserve his faith?
Job 19:25.

What relationship did the grandson provide for Naomi that would relieve much of her sorrow? Ruth 4:14.

The village women told Naomi that the Lord had provided a kinsman for her in Ruth's son. Here again we meet that Hebrew word *goel*, earlier translated “kinsman-redeemer.” Elsewhere, the Bible writers applied the term to God Himself, the ultimate Kinsman-Redeemer.

SEARCH AND LEARN: What does our heavenly Kinsman-Redeemer promise in the following verses:

Isa. 41:14 _____

Isa. 48:17 _____

Isa. 54:8 _____

Jer. 50:34 _____

Through the image of the ancient Israelite *goel* [kinsman-redeemer], God gives us a glimpse of what He plans to do for His people. He longs that all will accept Him as their divine Redeemer and permit Him to bring them justice and restoration through reconciliation with heaven. A kinsman-

redeemer could rescue another from slavery. Christ has delivered us from the bondage of sin. Even as Boaz married Ruth, Jesus desires to be united with His church.



III. ANCESTOR OF THE TRUE REDEEMER (Ruth 4:17-22).

Ruth's great-grandson became king of Israel, and eventually a type of an even greater David, the Messiah Himself.

Note that David was a fourth-generation descendant of a Moabite woman (see Deut. 23:3) and most likely a fifth-generation descendant of the harlot, Rahab. All were ancestors of Jesus. What does this tell us about God's desire to save all people?

The genealogy of Christ lists four women. Three of them had questionable reputations. But the Lord was God of Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba, as well as God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus had come to save all—sinners, outcasts, foreigners, everyone. We, His followers, must not let prejudice or animosity blind us to the fact that we are witnesses for and represent Jesus to every man and woman, every social class or nationality. We can witness in total joy and confidence because—as the book of Ruth so wonderfully illustrates—God has only thoughts of love, mercy, and the restoration of justice toward us.

ILLUMINATION: “The father of David. In these words the author comes to the climax of his story, and justifies his narration of it. They point out the fulfillment of the blessing pronounced on Ruth by the townsfolk of Bethlehem (see vs. 11, 12, 15). The name of the kinsman who thought marriage with the converted Moabitess would endanger his inheritance is forgotten; but from Boaz comes David, the ancestor and type of Christ. Obed was the son of Naomi through the love of Ruth.

“Had the Jewish nation appreciated the lesson of the book of Ruth—that God is no respecter of persons—their attitude toward the Gentiles would have been vastly different from what it was. They would have been looking for a Messiah whose mission was to save all men from sin, whether Jew or Gentile, and not merely for a Jewish Messiah to save the Jewish nation from bondage to Rome.”—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 444.

What major lesson can we draw from the book of Ruth?

“If we will but practice love and sympathy toward our fellow men, many of them will say to us as Ruth said to her mother-in-law, ‘Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God.’ And we in turn can reply to them as Boaz did to Ruth, ‘The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.’ ”—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 444.

FURTHER STUDY AND MEDITATION: “The advancing hosts of Israel found that knowledge of the mighty workings of the God of the Hebrews had gone before them, and that some among the heathen were learning that He alone was the true God. In wicked Jericho the testimony of the heathen woman was, ‘The Lord your God, He is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath.’ Joshua 2:11. The knowledge of Jehovah that had thus come to her, proved her salvation. By faith ‘Rahab perished not with them that believed not.’ Hebrews 11:31. And her conversion was not an isolated case of God’s mercy toward idolaters who acknowledged His divine authority. In the midst of the land a numerous people—the Gibeonites—renounced their heathenism and united with Israel, sharing in the blessings of the covenant.

“No distinction on account of nationality, race, or caste, is recognized by God. He is the Maker of all mankind. All men are of one family by creation, and all are one through redemption. Christ came to demolish every wall of partition, to throw open every compartment of the temple courts, that every soul may have free access to God. His love is so broad, so deep, so full, that it penetrates everywhere. It lifts out of Satan’s influence those who have been deluded by his deceptions, and places them within reach of the throne of God, the throne encircled by the rainbow of promise. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free.”—*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 369, 370.

SUMMARY: Through the intervention of Boaz, the security and self-worth of Ruth and Naomi was restored. And from his and Ruth’s child descended the line that would lead to another Child born in Bethlehem, the world’s Kinsman-Redeemer. Jesus would plead our case before the universe, and would bring justice and mercy and love to all who would accept. Boaz obtained justice at the gate for two women. Jesus died outside the gate to establish justice and mercy for every one of us.

APPLICATION

- The book of Ruth contains the story of God working out His love through those who love Him. It shows that both the godly life and salvation itself are possible. But God is waiting to write more such stories—in the lives of each one of us. When that happens, others will be able to say because of us, “Blessed be the Lord.”
- Does my life lead others to exclaim “Blessed be the Lord”?

NOTES:

Introduction to the Book of Esther

In many ways the book of Esther parallels the book of Ruth. It, too, is about a woman who finds herself caught up in tragedy but who refuses to give in to hopelessness. Esther, like Ruth, is at first guided by an older person, but when the right time comes, she takes the initiative—even more so than Ruth. God is able to use her also to resolve a seemingly insurmountable problem. Both books reveal that what may seem to be coincidence really is Providence at work. We discover that what at first appears to be random circumstances are in actuality pieces of a God-directed plan. God's people need not fear. God is in ultimate control.

In both Ruth and Esther, we see a deliverer whose actions give us a glimpse of Jesus, the true Deliverer. Boaz was Ruth's *goel* (kinsman-redeemer), and Esther was the saviour of God's people in her day. Behind them and working through them is the Lord. His people again face problems and crises today. But at the cross the curtain was drawn aside that we might have a glimpse of the glory and love that the One who will complete the final rescue at the Second Coming has for us.

The book of Esther is a favorite among both Jews and Christians. For the Jew it presents the reason for the feast of Purim. For the Christian, it is a reminder that God rules over human affairs. For everyone this book meets human needs in a practical way.

Overview of Esther

Esther 1	Disgrace at the Royal Banquet
Esther 2:1-18	Esther Becomes Queen
Esther 2:19-23	Mordecai Exposes a Conspiracy
Esther 3	Haman's Plot to Destroy God's People
Esther 4	Mordecai Requests Esther to Intercede
Esther 5	Esther's First Banquet
Esther 6	Mordecai Honored
Esther 7	Haman's Fate
Esther 8	Edict in Behalf of God's People
Esther 9:1-17	Triumph of God's People
Esther 9:18-32	Establishment of the Festival of Purim
Esther 10	The Greatness of Mordecai

Suggested preliminary reading: Read, in the translation of your choice, the entire book of Esther at one sitting.

The Price of Integrity

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Esther 1:1—2:4.



MEMORY TEXT: "I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised: so shall I be saved from mine enemies" (Psalm 18:3).

CENTRAL THOUGHT: No matter what our flaws or limitations, God can use each of us if we will submit to His leading. When He comes into the life, He can transform hopelessness into victory, and sinners into heroes and heroines of faith.

OUTLINE: Esther 1:1—2:4.

- I. Display of pomp and power (Esther 1:1-9).
- II. Vashti's summons and refusal to appear (Esther 1:10-22).
- III. The unsuccessful Greek campaign (takes place between Esther 1 and 2).
- IV. Selecting a new queen (Esther 2:1-4).

INTRODUCTION: In Nebuchadnezzar's dream (see Daniel 2), God predicted that Babylon would not last forever. Another kingdom would take its place. That kingdom in turn was to give way to yet a third. As we begin our study of the book of Esther, we find ourselves at the point in history where the second kingdom, Medo-Persia, desperately attempts to contain a growing rebelliousness on its western frontier, in Macedonia or Greece.

Attempting to squelch the upstart power, Darius the Great led a massive army into Greece—only to suffer a resounding defeat at the historic battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. Seven years later, Darius having died by then, his son Xerxes (Ahasuerus, see *Prophets and Kings*, p. 600) planned a major campaign against the Greeks, both to avenge his father's defeat and to subdue the turmoil on his western frontier.

Perhaps trying to bolster his own confidence and that of his military and provincial leaders—upon whom he was dependent if the Greek campaign was to succeed—Ahasuerus sponsored a 180-day cultural exhibition in his capital, Susa.

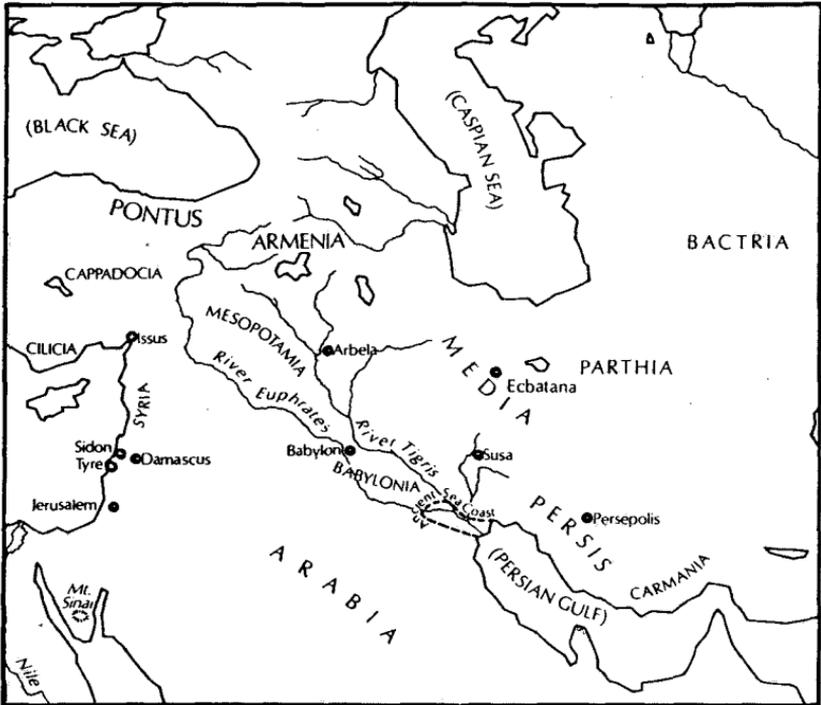


I. DISPLAY OF POMP AND POWER (Esther 1:1-9).

How extensive was the Medo-Persian Empire at the time of Esther?

During the closing years of the reign of Darius Hystaspes and the early years of the reign of his son and successor, Xerxes, the Persian Empire reached the height of its power. Esther 1:1 reports that the domain of Xerxes (Ahasuerus), extended from the northwestern frontier of India westward to

the northern boundary of Ethiopia. From east to west it stretched 3,000 miles. In width it varied from 500 to 1,500 miles, with a total area of about 2 million square miles. Susa shared the honor of being the capital of the Persian Empire with the cities of Ecbatana and Persepolis.



The city of Susa had a circumference of six or seven miles. The king resided in a fortress or acropolis located on an elevated site enclosed by a massive wall two and a half miles in length.

What special events marked the third year of Ahasuerus' reign and what did he plan as a climax to this spectacular festival? Esther 1:5-9.

Most likely, the feast consisted of successive relays of guests since it was unlikely the king's officers could have stayed away from their posts for so long.

Note the unusual comment concerning wine consumption in verse 8. It seems that compulsory, competitive drinking was not mandated at the king's feast—an interesting departure from what apparently was the usual procedure. The Greek writer Xenophon observed of the Persians' drinking habits that they "drink so much that they cannot stand upright on their feet, and must be carried out" (quoted in B. A. Cohen, "Esther," *The Five Megilloth* [Soncino Press], p. 197). While we might commend the king for this provision for moderation, it left him with less excuse for the rash acts in which he engaged while intoxicated.



II. VASHTI'S SUMMONS AND REFUSAL TO APPEAR (Esther 1:10-22).

What did King Ahasuerus demand of Queen Vashti, and what was his mental state at the time of the request? Esther 1:10, 11.

What the king expected Vashti to do is not clear from the text itself. The Jewish Bible commentary *Midrash Rabbah* speculates that he was requesting her to appear unclothed before the throng of guests. Whatever was involved, it clearly was something that would have violated her sense of dignity and good taste. Some commentators feel that the author of Esther here evokes sympathy for Vashti and her predicament.

ILLUMINATION: “We read with pleasure of the feast of queen Vashti. This was not a feast attended by a promiscuous number, but a feast given by the queen for the women of rank in the kingdom, who were entertained with modest courtesy, without wantonness or sensuality.

“It was when the king was not himself, when his reason was dethroned by wine-drinking that he sent for the queen, that those present at his feast, men besotted by wine, might gaze on her beauty. She acted in harmony with a pure conscience.

“Vashti refused to obey the king’s command, thinking that when he came to himself, he would commend her course of action. But the king had unwise advisers. They argued it would be a power given to woman that would be to her injury.”—Ellen G. White comments, *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1139.

How did the king react to Vashti’s refusal to come when called? Esther 1:12.

COMPARE the actions of Ahasuerus with those of Herod recorded in Matthew 14:6-10.

ILLUMINATION: “The king [Herod] was dazed with wine. Passion held sway, and reason was dethroned. He saw only the hall of pleasure, with its reveling guests, the banquet table, the sparkling wine and the flashing lights, and the young girl dancing before him. In the recklessness of the moment, he desired to make some display that would exalt him before the great men of his realm. With an oath he promised to give the daughter of Herodias whatever she might ask, even to the half of his kingdom. . . . The girl returned with the terrible petition, ‘I will that thou forthwith give me in a charger the head of John the Baptist.’ ”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 221.

What graphic language did Solomon use to decry the horrible effects of wine? Prov. 23:29-35.

THINK IT THROUGH: What can we learn from these unfortunate Biblical experiences involving use of alcoholic beverages?



What suggestions did Memucan make for dealing with the reluctant queen? Esther 1:16-22.

ILLUMINATION: “Memucan is spokesman for the entire group of seven special counselors. In his answer he implies that Persian law provided no penalty for the case at hand. It had not, in fact, contemplated a case of this kind. There was no precedent.”—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 466.

Memucan probably sensed that the king—as a way to get out of an awkward and embarrassing situation—wished to condemn Vashti. The counselor offered a way that would make the ruler’s revenge seem a matter of public policy and national concern. Perhaps what occurred is a sample of the ever-present intrigue that plagued the ancient Oriental courts. Ahasuerus’ courtiers saw and seized an opportunity to nullify the queen’s influence on her husband, giving them in turn more sway over him. Because Vashti did not appear at the king’s command, now she must disappear—and disappear she does from the story.

The king and his court seemed concerned that they must protect the honor of men; that is, that women will not appear to sway and influence them. Yet ironically history indicates that Xerxes himself often fell under the influence of women. He was noted for his dealings with them. Herodotus in his *Histories* portrays the king as asking advice of a woman officer, Astemesis, before and after the battle of Salamis. The book of Esther itself reveals the influence Esther had on her husband.

The king passed a law that was intended to “keep women in their place.” It was registered among those laws that, according to Persian custom, could never be changed. “By depicting the king dispatching his edict without so much as a further thought, the author indirectly comments on the whimsical way laws were made in a land which made so much of law and judgment.”—Joyce Baldwin, *Esther* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984, p. 62).

The implication is that Vashti was banished to a life of obscurity, humiliation, and derision. The Bible also implies that later the king may have regretted having disposed of her. But pride kept him from seeking her forgiveness and reinstating her.

THINK IT THROUGH: Ahasuerus’ counselors made much of the effect on husband-wife relationships if the king did not take drastic action (Esther 1:15-22). What do you think would have been the result if Ahasuerus had acknowledged his mistake publicly and honored Vashti for living by her sense of integrity? What is the effect of leaders acknowledging mistakes today? Have you at some time backed yourself into a position where pride would not let you seek a way out? Did your action hurt only yourself, or did it involve others?

WED

III. THE UNSUCCESSFUL GREEK CAMPAIGN.

A time lapse of three to four years took place between chapters 1 and 2 of Esther. During that time the king led a massive army to Greece to vindicate the humiliation his father had suffered at Marathon. From the beginning, the expedition was fraught with difficulty. Then when Ahasuerus limped back home with the tattered remnants of an army after having suffered a defeat that all but doomed the empire, Queen Vashti was no longer in a position to console him.

IV. SELECTING A NEW QUEEN (Esther 2:1-4).

CONTRAST the mental experience King Ahasuerus underwent concerning Vashti (Esther 2:1) with that of the prodigal son as he compared his present state with what he had in the home he had left behind (Luke 15:17). What is the essential difference between the two?

“The prodigal son in his wretchedness ‘came to himself.’ The deceptive power that Satan had exercised over him was broken. He saw that his suffering was the result of his own folly. . . . The son determines to confess his guilt. He will go to his father, saying, ‘I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.’ . . . The young man turns from the swineherds and the husks and sets his face toward home. Trembling with weakness and faint from hunger, he presses eagerly on his way. He has no covering to conceal his rags; but his misery has conquered pride.”—*Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 202, 203.

Unlike the prodigal son, the proud monarch, Ahasuerus, recognized what he had done but was unwilling, or thought it impossible, to correct his error.

ILLUMINATION: “There is little doubt that the king, when he afterward considered the matter, felt that Vashti deserved to be honored, rather than treated as she was.

“No law of divorce, drawn up by men who for many days had given themselves up to wine-drinking, men who were unable to control the appetite, could be of any value in the eyes of the King of kings. These men were unable to reason soundly and nobly. They could not discern the real situation.

“However high their office, men are amenable to God. The great power exercised by kings, often leads to extremes in exaltation of self. And the worthless vows made to enact laws which disregard the higher laws of God, lead to great injustice.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1139.

THU

THINK IT THROUGH: Could the weaknesses of character we see revealed in Ahasuerus have anything to do with his decision to plunge his empire into destructive war with the Greek states? If so, what must we be alert to in our own thinking and actions?

What suggestion was made to solve the king's dilemma? Esther 2: 2, 3.

“This proposal was certain to be most agreeable to an Oriental monarch like Xerxes. Furthermore, the suggestion that he might find someone even more beautiful and to his liking than Vashti would take his thoughts away from her, and thus safeguard the interests of the men who had proposed her humiliation.”—*SDA Bible Comentary*, vol. 3, p. 468.

How did the king react to his counselors' suggestions? Esther 2:4.

Although the suggestion of his attendants that he sponsor a contest to determine who would be his new queen appeared to solve the king's dilemma, the problems were just beginning for a young Jewess named Esther.

THINK IT THROUGH:

- Some scholars think that the name Vashti means “the best.” Do you feel that she deserves the honor of such a name?
- Is it not ironic that, in light of Vashti's motives, she would be deposed and a queen sought who was “better?” Do you agree with those who hold to the statement that Vashti is the unsung heroine of the book of Esther?
- Do you think that Vashti was justified in her refusal to obey the king?
- Are humans today any more willing to admit mistakes and seek forgiveness than was Ahasuerus?
- Might we be a little less hasty in making a decision if we knew that once the decision was announced it would be irrevocable?
- What lessons can we learn from this experience about depending upon advice from others?
- Does obedience and integrity always yield a positive reward?



FURTHER STUDY AND MEDITATION: “There is little doubt that the king, when he afterward considered the matter, felt that Vashti deserved to be honored, rather than to be treated as she was.

“No law of divorce, drawn up by men who for many days had given themselves up to wine-drinking, men who were unable to control the appetite, could be of any value in the eyes of the King of kings. These men were unable to reason soundly and nobly. They could not discern the real situation.

“However high their office, men are amenable to God. The great power exercised by kings, often leads to extremes in exaltation of self. And the worthless vows made to enact laws which disregard the higher laws of God, lead to great injustice.

“Occasions of indulgence such as are pictured in the first chapter of Esther, do not glorify God. But the Lord accomplishes His will through men who are nevertheless misleading others. If God did not stretch forth His restraining hand, strange presentations would be seen. But God impresses human minds to accomplish His purpose, even though the one used continues to follow wrong practice. And the Lord works out His plans through men who do not acknowledge His lessons of wisdom. In His hand is the heart of every earthly ruler, to turn whithersoever He will, as He turneth the waters of the river.

“Through the experience that brought Esther to the Medo-Persian throne, God was working for the accomplishment of His purposes for His people. That which was done under the influence of much wine worked out for good to Israel.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1139.

SUMMARY: Although the Bible makes beautiful promises of reward for obedience, that reward does not always come in an external, attractive manner. Sometimes it is nothing more than a clear conscience, an inner peace, and the inner knowledge of having done what is right. In the case of Daniel, integrity led from obscurity to an elevated position. In the case of Vashti, it led from an elevated position to a place of obscurity and even scorn. However, in each case, a greater reward will be realized on the final day of reckoning.

APPLICATION

- In this section of the book of Esther, two people have had to weigh the price of integrity—Ahasuerus and Vashti. In both cases, following principle presented a great potential for humiliation. Vashti was willing to pay the price, Ahasuerus was not.
- What was the key to Vashti’s willingness to stand for right?
- In what ways can I emulate her example?

NOTES:



MIDPOINT IN HARVEST 90

If it takes even the smallest turn off course at mid-ocean, a ship can be far away from its target port when it reaches the shoreline. At midpoint between two General Conference sessions should we not take a reading of how we are doing as we travel toward our Harvest 90 goals?

The Problems of Disobedience

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Esther 2:5-23.



MEMORY TEXT: "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 14:12).

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Although Christians may find themselves facing difficulty, often that difficulty comes as a result of not having previously followed God's instructions.

OVERVIEW: Esther 2:5-23		
Esther 2:5-11	Esther 2:12-18	Esther 2:19-23
Esther taken to the palace; Her race not disclosed	Preparation for the contest; Esther made queen	Mordecai discovers a plot

INTRODUCTION: When the Children of Israel were led out of Egypt into the promised land of Canaan, God described the future for them in dramatic terms: "Understand that this day I offer you the choice of a blessing and a curse. The blessing will come if you listen to the commandments of the Lord your God which I give you this day, and the curse if you do not listen to the commandments of the Lord your God but turn aside from the way that I command you this day and follow other gods whom you do not know" (Deut. 11:26-28, NEB).

Unfortunately, the Hebrews did not follow the Lord as closely as they should have. In spite of His patience and longsuffering, God at last allowed both the kingdom of Israel (the 10 northern tribes) and the kingdom of Judah to be carried into captivity—the former by the Assyrians, the latter by the Babylonians. But, even in captivity, God still loved His people. Speaking for God to the Jewish people, the prophet Jeremiah said: "When a full seventy years has passed over Babylon, I will take up your cause and fulfill the promise of good things I made you, by bringing you back to this place" (Jer. 29:10, NEB).

The prophet Isaiah, being quite specific about the return of the Jews from exile, predicted that a ruler named Cyrus (Isa. 44:28—45:1) would be the one to effect their deliverance. Speaking through the prophet, God said: "I alone have roused this man in righteousness, and I will smooth his path before him; he shall rebuild my city and let my exiles go free—not for a

price nor for a bribe, says the Lord of Hosts" (Isa. 45:13, NEB). Events took place exactly as Jeremiah and Isaiah had predicted, but most of the Jewish exiles did not respond enthusiastically.

ILLUMINATION: "Under the favor shown them by Cyrus, nearly fifty thousand of the children of the captivity had taken advantage of the decree permitting their return. These, however, in comparison with the hundreds of thousands scattered throughout the provinces of Medo-Persia, were but a mere remnant. The great majority of the Israelites had chosen to remain in the land of their exile rather than undergo the hardships of the return journey and the re-establishment of their desolated cities and homes."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 598.



I. MORDECAI AND ESTHER INTRODUCED (Esther 2:5-11).

1. Esther Taken to the Palace (verses 5-9).

What was Mordecai's background? Verses 5, 6.

The name Mordecai may be the Hebrew version of the common Mesopotamian name *Mardukaya*, which appears in several forms on literary tablets that archeologists have excavated from the ruins of Persepolis, another capital of the empire.

What were some of the reasons that most of the Jews did not return to Palestine?

A collection of cuneiform tablets found in 1893 at Nippur, about sixty-five miles southeast of Babylon, suggests the growing success and prosperity of the Jewish exiles. The tablets were business records of a commercial establishment run by a Murashu family that dealt mainly with landowners and farm workers in central and southern Babylonia. Many of the House of Murashu's customers had Jewish names, indicating their increasing involvement in the economic life of the land.

The Jewish exiles in Babylonia prospered and their community grew large. In time, Jews formed the major part of the population in certain areas of the Persian empire. They were the largest Jewish community among the Jews scattered outside Palestine. They helped support the Jewish community and the temple in the Holy Land with their funds and contributions until well into Christian times. After the destruction of the temple by the Romans, the Jewish communities in the Near East, outside Palestine, dominated Judaism until the rise of Islam.

With their success in their land of exile, we can understand why so many succumbed to the temptation to stay where they were rather than to leave everything they knew to go to what seemed an uncertain future in a land they only knew by word of mouth.

Why was Esther being taken care of by Mordecai? Esther 2:7.

In the book of Ruth, we discovered the Biblical definition of a widow: a woman without male relatives to support her and give her status in male-dominated Israelite society. In the book of Esther, we encounter another disadvantaged class—the orphan. Orphans were children or youths with no relatives to care for them. Scripture called for God’s people to provide special care for the orphan.

Esther’s parents were dead. But her cousin Mordecai rescued her from the limbo of being an orphan by adopting her as his own daughter. Through his kindness, she received a secure place in the exiled Jewish community at Susa.



Where did Esther find herself and why was she there? Esther 2:8, 3.

How do we reconcile what happened to Esther with God’s prohibition against Jews marrying Gentiles? Esther 2:8; Deut. 7:3.

When God brought the Hebrews out of Egypt, he forbade them to intermarry with the heathen. Yet here was a Jewess being called to the palace of the king, an uncircumcised Gentile whose intemperate ways had led to the need for a new queen.

ILLUMINATION: “The Lord commanded ancient Israel not to intermarry with the idolatrous nations around them: ‘Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son.’ The reason is given. Infinite Wisdom, foreseeing the result of such unions, declares: ‘For they will turn away thy son from following Me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly.’ ‘For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto Himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth.’ . . . In the New Testament are similar prohibitions concerning the marriage of Christians with the ungodly.”—*Testimonies*, vol. 5, pp. 363, 364.

Ellen White also wrote that it was in “the providence of God [that] Esther, a Jewess who feared the Most High, had been made queen of the Medo-Persian kingdom.”—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 601.

THINK IT THROUGH: God is not arbitrary, fickle, nor inconsistent. But human beings may at times be surprised at the way He works through circumstances that appear to be contrary to His revealed will. That being so, are we ever justified in taking actions that we recognize as being contrary to what He stipulates should be done?

NOTES:



SEARCH AND LEARN: Study what the Bible says about marriages between believers and unbelievers from the passages that follow:

1. Gen. 24:3 _____
2. Deut. 7:3-8 _____
3. Amos 3:3 _____

However, if such a marriage already exists, we should not be quick to dissolve it.

“If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband” (1 Cor. 7:12-14, NIV).

THINK IT THROUGH: What do you think Paul means when he says that the Christian husband or wife sanctifies his or her spouse?

There is much in the story of Esther that we do not understand. We may be tempted to condemn her for letting herself get into such a position. Surely, we might assume, she knew that she should never have become the wife of a pagan king. But the author does not explain all the circumstances that led her into a Persian harem. You will remember that the author of the book of Ruth did not explain why Elimelech fled with his family to Moab, or why his sons married Moabite women.

If we concentrate on these questions, we will miss Scripture’s major purpose. The authors of these two Bible books did not seem to be too concerned with the question of how or why people got into problems. Most of us know all too well how to do that. Instead the authors of these Bible books wanted to show how God can bring good out of any situation, no matter how seemingly impossible it might be. We must learn to see how God can overcome any difficulty. We must recognize that His power to overrule has no bounds. The story of Esther is a story of God’s deliverance. It is meant to sustain and encourage His people until persecution is forever eliminated. Our Saviour is as ready to work in our lives today as He was in Persian times.

How was Esther treated at the palace? Esther 2:9.

“We find Esther winning such regard from Hegai, that he showed her more kindness and respect than to any other of her companions. Beauty alone could not have done this: for to loveliness, in all its varieties, he had no doubt been accustomed. But the cultivated intellect, the spiritual graces, of the Hebrew woman, which so marked her superiority over the females of every other nation, gave to the mere perishable beauty of face and form an interest and a charm unlike every other; and this it was which so powerfully attracted the regard of Hegai, and in due time, the devoted love of the king.”—Grace Aquilar, *The Women of Israel* (London: George Routledge & Sons, n.d.), p. 338.

2. Esther's Race Not Disclosed (Esther 2:10, 11).

What special instructions did Mordecai give Esther? Verse 10.

Because of all that her foster father had done for her, Esther felt a strong sense of loyalty and obligation to him. She accepted his advice to downplay her ethnic and religious identity. What his reasons for hiding her heritage were we cannot now tell. From the courage he shows later in the book, it obviously was not based on fear. As modern readers, we must simply accept the fact that Mordecai had what he thought were sound reasons. Otherwise, we will be judging his actions and motives on the basis of incomplete facts.

Although Esther may have hidden her identity, she could not hide everything. Her religion had already shaped her fundamental personality and character. This had a powerful impact on those who came into contact with her. She attracted them to herself in ways that others did not.

Archeological evidence suggests that harem life was anything but glamorous. The ruins of one Persian harem reveals that it consisted of several tiers of apartments, each tier with a long hall whose roof was supported by only four columns plus a tiny apartment whose occupant must have found it extremely confining.

NOTES:

II. THE CONTEST FOR QUEEN, ITS RESULTS AND A CELEBRATION (Esther 2:12-18).

Study the details of the contest for queen in verses 12 through 16. Then summarize below what took place:

What led to Esther's selection as queen? Esther 2:17.

Although Esther was queen, she did not rule. Instead, she held at best a precarious position, as we shall see in Esther 4:11. Oriental harems were hotbeds of constant intrigue, as the wives struggled to gain favor and power with the king and advance the position of their children. History records many political plots and coups that first festered in royal harems. No wonder Esther would later feel unsure of her relationship with the king.

How did the king's response to his selection demonstrate his pleasure in having Esther as queen? Esther 2:18.



III. MORDECAI DISCOVERS A PLOT (Esther 2:19-23).

Why did Mordecai sit at the king's gate as described in verse 19?

As we studied the book of Ruth we saw something of the important role the gate of a city played in the life of an ancient Near Eastern community. It was the market place, social center, and hall of justice. The gate at Persepolis measured 60 by 30 meters, and the gate at Susa must have been comparable in size. Much activity must have been continually going on there. Esther 2:19, 21 depicts Mordecai sitting at the city gate. Most likely he was not just lounging there, but was involved in some civic or royal activity.

"Sitting in the gate" is often a legal term in Scripture. "Mordecai became—if he was not already . . . a palace attendant or minor official. The gate of the palace was where the royal offices were located and business was transacted."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p.470.

What did Mordecai discover as he sat at the king's gate? Esther 2:21.

Plotting and conspiracies were facts of life in the ancient Near East. This one involved two of the palace guards. The royal officers Bighthan and Teresh, angry for some reason at Xerxes (Ahasuerus), decided to assassinate the king.

Assassinations were an ever-present threat to any ruler. Ancient records, including the Bible, are full of accounts of kings and emperors being removed from power by assassination. Often the usurpers would later succumb to the knife or to poison. Political terrorism is not a new thing. It is almost as old as sin itself.

What steps did Mordecai take to let the king know about the plot? What did the king do when he learned about it? Esther 2:22, 23.

Mordecai told Esther about the plot. She passed the word to the king, being careful to make sure that her foster father received credit for uncovering the threat.

After an investigation confirmed the truth of the conspiracy, the king had the two men executed. Then Xerxes (Ahasuerus) had Mordecai's deed recorded in the royal annals, a common custom of the time. The ancient historian Herodotus mentions that the Persian king kept such yearly records in his quarters. The Persian ruler had managed to survive another assassination attempt. But history records that eventually a more successful conspiracy did lead to his death.

Was Mordecai disappointed that the king did not reward him for saving his life? Whether he was or not, Providence had a reason for postponing the honor he deserved.

NOTES:



FURTHER STUDY AND MEDITATION: Read pages 598-600 in the chapter entitled "In the Days of Queen Esther" in *Prophets and Kings*.

"Profound respect for her benefactor led Esther to cherish his counsel even after she became queen. This fact speaks well of Mordecai as a foster parent, and of Esther as a loyal and obedient daughter. Her beauty was essentially beauty of character and personality; beauty of appearance was incidental. Too often parental laxity on the one hand or overbearing strictness on the other, implants in young people the desire to be free from restraint, and cultivates waywardness and delinquency. Happy the home where parental authority is balanced with respect for the individuality of its youth, where parental control is exercised with the objective of developing self-control. Like Esther, such youth leave home with well-balanced personalities and disciplined characters."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, pp. 470, 471.

SUMMARY: Esther married a pagan king. This puzzles us. But God was already working behind the scenes, preparing a way to deliver His threatened people. He can take the most unusual circumstances and turn them around to the extent that they become the tools to perform His will.

APPLICATION

- If I am married to an unbeliever, what can I do to more effectively love my unbelieving spouse into a saving relationship with Jesus?
- What obligations does the church have in ministering to unbelieving spouses? How can the church meet that responsibility?
- What can I do to witness to those who are most influential in the world?

NOTES:



How to Deal with Difficulties in Meeting Your Harvest 90 Goals

Claim this promise:

"The God of heaven, he will prosper us" (Neh. 2:20).

Sin's Blind Hatred

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Esther 3:1-15.

SAB **IPMJ** **MEMORY TEXT:** "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7).

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Scripture does not explain why Haman hated Mordecai and his people. Even if we could have read the prime minister's mind and known his motivations, it still would not have made sense to us. Sin has no reason for existence. But as soon as it came into being, it sought to destroy all that represented good. In the book of Esther, we see one more powerful illustration of the conflict between good and evil. Although evil may seem for awhile to triumph, God and good eventually will conquer.

OVERVIEW: Esther 3:1-15

3:1-5	3:6-11	3:12-15
Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman	Haman plots to destroy the Jews	Decree sent out; Haman and the king drink a toast

INTRODUCTION: This week we encounter one of the unexplainable results of sin—blind, unreasoning, irrational hatred that leads to persecution. An official of the Persian government conceives a plan for destroying an entire people. But other than the fact that he has been offended because a member of that ethnic group refused to honor him in the way Haman thought was his due, we are given no reason why he should take his spite out on an entire people. We can and will offer some suggestions, but ultimately, we must admit that persecution really makes no sense.

That is the nature of sin—it makes no sense. Ellen White wrote that sin "is mysterious, unaccountable" (*The Great Controversy*, p. 493). "It is impossible to explain the origin of sin so as to give a reason for its existence" (*The Great Controversy*, p. 492). The things that sin motivates men and women to do also are unexplainable. Sin drove Haman to seek the destruction of God's people, but saying that does not explain it. As far as we know, the body of God's people had done nothing to him. Why should he lust for their total destruction? But that is the nature of sin.

The persecution of God's people during the last days will make no more sense. We say that evil hates good. But why should it? Why cannot evil just ignore good? Why should it go out of its way to destroy those who are good? Evil's drive to persecute is incomprehensible. Perhaps that is why the author of Esther is vague about the motivations of Haman and Mordecai. He does

not want to cloud the picture with explanations and reasons that do not truly explain. The author wants us to grasp clearly the fact that Haman's persecution is, in the last analysis, something monstrous and without reason.



I. MORDECAI REFUSES TO BOW TO HAMAN (Esther 3:1-5).

What high honor did the king give Haman? Verse 1.

Jewish tradition holds that the title "Agagite" indicates that Haman was a descendant of King Agag. If that were so what would be the implications in the light of 1 Samuel 15:1-35?

Ancient Jewish commentators saw in the term "the Agagite" a continuation of the conflict between Saul and the king of the Amalekites. They speculated that the king fathered a child just before his execution, and that this child founded a line that ultimately led to Haman. Because Mordecai was of the tribe of Benjamin, they considered him to be a descendant of Saul. If this were so, the struggle between the two kings was once more resumed. However, some commentators are doubtful about this possibility: "The names Hammedatha (Haman's father), Haman, and those of Haman's ten sons (Es. 9:7-9) are all good Persian ones, and there is nothing in Agagite that is necessarily not Persian."—H. L. Ellison, *From Babylon to Bethlehem* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 58.

The Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, renders Agagite as "bully," the "Bugaeon," and "the Macedonian," and in one manuscript as the "Gogite." Even if Haman was a descendant of the Amalekites, would that justify and explain his hatred?

What interfered with Haman's enjoyment of his new honor? Esther 3:2.

"Perhaps Haman had been elevated from a low position. The special command required that all, even those who previously had outranked Haman, should now fall prostrate before him."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 472.

ILLUMINATION: "Mordecai had done Haman no harm, but had simply refused to show him worshipful reverence."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 600.



SEARCH AND LEARN: Prostration before superiors was a universal custom. Notice what the following texts have to say about this practice:

1. 1 Sam. 24:8 _____
2. 2 Sam. 14:4 _____
3. 1 Kings 1:16 _____

The Jewish Targums suggest that Haman claimed divine powers. If that were so, it would explain Ellen White's comment that he expected worshipful reverence. The Targums also suggest that Haman wore an idol on his clothing. But the fact is that the author of the book of Esther did not choose to explain why Mordecai refused to bow to Haman. Perhaps he omitted the reason in order to stress the irrationality of persecution.

What is suggested by the comments of Mordecai's fellow attendants at court? Esther 3:3, 4.

These verses suggest that the king's servants were aware of Haman's hatred for the Jews.

ILLUMINATION: "The persistent attempt made to secure Mordecai's compliance with the edict to bow before Haman implies that his fellow officials esteemed him highly. They sought to give [Mordecai] a fair opportunity before reporting the matter. From their point of view it was a serious precedent—if one royal decree could thus be flouted, how about others?"—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 472.

What was Haman's reaction when he discovered Mordecai's refusal to bow down? Esther 3:5.

Because we read the book of Esther in translation, we miss many of the literary touches and techniques the author uses. Here, for example, the author plays on the similarity of sound between the name of Haman and the Hebrew word for wrath, *hema*.

II. HAMAN PLOTS TO DESTROY THE JEWS (Esther 3:6-11).

1. The Plot Developed (Esther 3:6, 7).

In seeking the best way to destroy the Jews, Haman sought the good will of his gods. Seeking a "lucky" day for the success of his plans, he began casting lots. Day by day and month by month, the lots were cast. Finally, the date was fixed: the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, a day almost a year in the future. (It corresponds to our month of March.)

Why did Haman seek revenge on Mordecai by deciding to try to exterminate the entire Jewish race?

In ancient times, people did not have the strong individualism shared by many in the world today. People thought of themselves not as individuals but as members of a family, tribe, ethnic group, or nation. Their sense of identity was determined and shaped by the group into which they were born. They shared the group's rewards and punishments. Also what they did brought either honor or shame to the group. We call this type of thinking "corporate identity." The story of Achan (Joshua 7) graphically illustrates how this type of society responds to a problem. Achan was not just a solitary Israelite—he was part of a family, a tribe, a people. The larger group shared

responsibility for the actions of an individual within it. A man or woman in the ancient world—and many parts of the world even today—was not an individual in the modern sense, but a component cell within a larger organism. What the larger group he belonged to did shaped him or her, and what he or she did affected the honor and reputation of the larger group.

Thus Haman did not just see Mordecai the individual, but also Mordecai the representative and part of the larger body of Jews. In a world of corporate identity, one got revenge against someone not just by attacking a single person, but the entire group from which the person came. We see this principle at work in world affairs even today.

But regardless of this fact, Haman's revenge for his hurt dignity was far out of proportion to the actual slight.

What does it mean to cast *pur*? Esther 3:7.

Some scholars used to suggest that the Jews made up the word *pur* just to explain the origin of the festival name *Purim*. Because they considered the story of Esther to be fiction, they did not believe the definition of *pur* found in Esther 3:7. But now we know that the word *pur* did mean “lot,” and that ancient people cast lots in the way the book of Esther describes. A cube-shaped die in the Yale archeological collection has an inscription that twice uses the word *puru*, “lot.” Known as “the die of Iahali,” a high official of Shalmaneser III (an Assyrian king ruling from 858 to 824 B.C.), “it is the only cube that has survived to this day from the time when lots were cast annually in the selection and installation of the ‘eponym official,’ whose name was used in chronological tables to signify a certain year of a king’s reign.”—W. W. Hallo, “The First Purim,” *Biblical Archeologist*, vol. 46, no. 1 (1983), p. 22. While the story of Esther took place some centuries later and Haman cast lots for a slightly different purpose, “the terminology and the underlying technique remain the same.”—*Biblical Archaeologist*, vol. 46, no. 1 (1983), p. 22. A chance archeological discovery has provided historical confirmation of the ancient practice recorded in Scripture.



2. The Plot Outlined (Esther 3:8-11).

What accusations did Haman make against the Jews when requesting their destruction? Were his accusations true? Esther 3:8.

“This charge was not true with respect to laws in general. It was only when a royal edict required a Jew to violate his religious beliefs that such a situation could arise. But the laws of the Medes and Persians were in the main fair and just, and Jews no doubt readily obeyed them. Had it been otherwise they would not have enjoyed the favor that was often shown them. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God strictly enjoined them to be law-abiding, peaceful subjects wherever they might be (Jer. 29:7).”—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol 3, p. 473.

ILLUSTRATION: Although it is true that the Jewish people at the time of this story were recognized as law-abiding citizens, it equally is true that their

forebears were not—at least not always. Thus, when the Jews first tried to rebuild the city of Jerusalem following the exile, the surrounding tribe wrote to the new Persian king reporting that: “You will discover by searching through the annals that this has been a rebellious city, harmful to the monarchy and its provinces, and that sedition has long been rife within its walls. That is why the city was laid waste. We submit to your majesty that, if it is rebuilt and its walls are completed, the result will be that you will have no more footing in the province Beyond-Euphrates” (Ezra 4:15, 16, NEB).

The king replied: “The letter you sent us has been read and translated in my presence. I issued an order and a search was made, and it was found that this city has a long history of revolt against kings and has been a place of rebellion and sedition” (Ezra 4:19, 20, NIV).

What strategy did Haman use in his approach to the king to gain approval for his plan? Esther 3:9.

One estimate suggests that Haman’s offer equaled two-thirds of the annual income of the Persian empire. Involved in his struggles with the Greeks, Xerxes (Ahasuerus) must have found the bribe an overwhelming temptation. Also, the ease with which Haman swayed the king demonstrates the power of a favored courtier over an Oriental despot.

What did the king do after a date for the slaughter had been settled? Esther 3:10, 11.

The ancient Oriental rulers, as has been true of too many rulers throughout human history, surrounded themselves with courtiers and advisers who told them what they wanted to hear, or catered to their egos and vanities. Too often, as in the case of Xerxes, they were rewarded for their dangerous advice.

III. DECREE SENT OUT (Esther 3:12-15).

CONTRAST the mood of Haman and Ahasuerus with that of the Jews following the release of the edict (Esther 3:15—4:3). Do Haman’s and Ahasuerus’ reactions remind you of other leaders in history?

SEARCH AND LEARN: What proclamations did other rulers of Persia issue?

Ezra 1:2-4 _____

Ezra 6:1-12 _____

Ezra 7:11-28 _____

The Persian rulers were noted for their tolerance toward different cultures and religions. As a means to obtain the loyalty of the various peoples they conquered, they supplied funds to restore ruined temples and to support local religious services. Religious tolerance was a major policy of the Persian imperial government. Thus the incident portrayed in the book of Esther puzzles many because it seems so out of character. The Assyrians would order the destruction of an entire people—but the Persians? Some have rejected the historicity of Esther because of this fact.

But the Persian empire was quite capable of genocide. History preserves several other incidents similar to the fate threatened for the Jews. In 522 B.C. at the death of King Cambyses, Smerdes the Magus usurped the throne. But after only eight months of rule, he was slain by Darius, and in the resulting upheaval, the Persians in the capital massacred every member of the Magi—the high priestly class—that they could find.

Herodotus stated: “The anniversary of this day has been a red-letter day in the Persian calendar, marked by an important festival known as the Magophonia, or Killing of the Magi, during which no Magus is allowed to show himself—every member of the caste stays indoors till the day is over.”—*The Histories III*, 79.

Xerxes himself had Babylon destroyed after the city rebelled against him. Persian rulers—like the Assyrians in previous centuries—also deported entire populations.

THINK IT THROUGH: How can leaders and administrators protect themselves from being misguided by the counsel, views, or ambitions of others? What kind of people should a good leader choose as his or her helpers and advisers? What can leaders do to make sure that they understand all they can about a problem before making a decision?

NOTES:



FURTHER STUDY AND MEDITATION: Read Ezekiel 18. In the same way that negative influences continue to spread, positive influences have a ripple effect that someday may astound us.

“Many a worker sends out into the world messages of strength and hope and courage, words that carry blessing to hearts in every land; but of the results he, toiling in loneliness and obscurity, knows little. So gifts are bestowed, burdens are borne, labor is done. Men sow the seeds from which, above their graves, others reap blessed harvests. They plant trees, that others may eat the fruit. They are content here to know that they have set in motion agencies for good. In the hereafter the action and reaction of all will be seen.

“Of every gift that God has bestowed, leading men to unselfish effort, a record is kept in heaven. To trace this in wide-spreading lines, to look upon those who by our efforts have been uplifted and ennobled, to behold in their history the outworking of true principles—this will be one of the studies and rewards of the heavenly school.”—*Education*, p. 306.

SUMMARY: A king who sought to conquer the world was himself conquered by a fawning and equally ambitious courtier, Haman. Sin destroys, but God saves.

APPLICATION

- Consider the individuals and nations mentioned in this lesson, comparing them to yourself and the people around you.
- What similarities do you see? What differences? What lessons can you learn from their experience?
- When it seems that you are surrounded with evil influences and that evil is triumphing, what can you do to gain a clear understanding of the fact that good eventually will gain the victory? What can you do to help others also gain this insight?

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The Death Decree

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Esther 4.



MEMORY TEXT: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

CENTRAL THOUGHT: God's hand is over human affairs. No situation exists but what He can turn it into a learning, character-building experience if we will let Him do so. Ultimately He will deliver His people.

OVERVIEW: Esther 4

Esther 4:1-5	Esther 4:6-12	Esther 4:13- 17
Mordecai's mourning and Esther's response	Mordecai's explanation and Esther's reply	Mordecai's rebuttal and Esther's acquiescence

INTRODUCTION: Throughout biblical history, God's people repeatedly have encountered situations where destruction seemed inevitable, yet in many of these situations deliverance has come in the nick of time—often from an unexpected source.

When it seemed that Jacob's family was doomed to starvation, help was found in Egypt. (Many scholars note parallels between the stories of Joseph and Esther.)

When the plight of the Hebrews had become totally unbearable, Moses appeared on the scene to lead God's people to the Promised Land.

When the Children of Israel found themselves between the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army, the waters parted and they passed through on dry land.

When the Midianites harassed the Israelites until life had become unbearable, God used Gideon and a mere 300 men to deliver them from the hands of their enemy.

In this week's lesson, we again see the people of God facing certain extinction unless something miraculous happens. Yet again, we discover how God can take situations—aspects of which are not to His liking—and turn them around in order for His purposes to be realized.

While many unfortunate events result from mistaken human decisions and actions, God is capable of making every mistake, every failure, every lapse of good judgment, a learning experience for us. And while we would not choose to repeat the experience, we can look back and see how our characters have been strengthened as a result.



I. MORDECAI'S MOURNING AND ESTHER'S RESPONSE (Esther 4:1-5).

When news of Haman's death decree reached the Jews living in Susa and elsewhere, how did they respond? Esther 4:1-3.

"The wearing of sackcloth and ashes was another symbol of profound grief. The Bible refers to numerous occasions when men wore these emblems of sorrow (see Gen. 37:34; 1 Kings 20:32; Isa. 37:2; Dan. 9:3; Jonah 3:6; etc.). Having read the edict, Mordecai at once must have perceived its origin and the motive that prompted it. His first impulse would naturally be to rend his garments and to put on sackcloth and ashes. But the palace was not considered to be an appropriate place for the demonstration of private grief. To be sure, Mordecai was not alone in feeling sorrow and consternation. In Shushan and throughout the provinces the doomed race made bitter lamentation. Hope that there might yet be deliverance from the decree seems not to have occurred to any."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 476.

What was Esther's reaction? Esther 4:4, 5.

Mordecai's behavior obviously disturbed his adopted daughter. She sent him clothes to wear instead of his garments of grief, and when he would not accept them, she dispatched Hatach, one of the king's eunuchs, to find out what the problem was.

II. MORDECAI'S EXPLANATION (Esther 4:6-9).

We often state that history repeats itself. The fact is that there are parallels.

Although the issues are not exactly the same, what decree, similar to that designed to destroy the Jews, will be issued shortly before Christ returns? Rev. 13:16, 17.

The same spirit that in ages past led to the persecution of the true church, will in the future lead to the pursuance of a similar course toward those who maintain their loyalty to God. Even now preparations are being made for this last great conflict.

"The decree that will finally go forth against the remnant people of God will be very similar to that issued by Ahasuerus against the Jews. . . .

"Satan will arouse indignation against the minority who refuse to accept popular customs and traditions. Men of position and reputation will join with the lawless and the vile to take counsel against the people of God. Wealth, genius, education, will combine to cover them with contempt. Persecuting rulers, ministers, and church members will conspire against them. With voice and pen, by boasts, threats, and ridicule, they will seek to overthrow their faith. By false representations and angry appeals, men will stir up the passions of the people. . . . On this battlefield will be fought

the last great conflict in the controversy between truth and error. And we are not left in doubt as to the issue. Today, as in the days of Esther and Mordecai, the Lord will vindicate His truth and His people.”—*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 605, 606.



When the last-day death decree comes, to what promise can God’s people cling? Psalm 91:11.

ILLUMINATION: “In all ages, God has wrought through holy angels for the succor and deliverance of His people. Celestial beings have taken an active part in the affairs of men. They have appeared clothed in garments that shone as the lightning; they have come as men in the garb of wayfarers. Angels have appeared in human form to men of God. They have rested, as if weary, under the oaks at noon. They have accepted the hospitalities of human homes. They have acted as guides to benighted travelers. They have, with their own hands, kindled the fires at the altar. They have opened prison doors and set free the servants of the Lord. Clothed with the panoply of heaven, they came to roll away the stone from the Saviour’s tomb.”—*The Great Controversy*, p. 631.

How will the response of God’s people now compare to the response of the Jews in Esther’s day? Esther 4:3. What heavenly assistance can we expect?

The dilemma faced by the Jewish people in the days of Esther is one that has been repeated on numerous occasions throughout history. For the Jews the experience recorded in Esther typifies the persecution of their people throughout the centuries. Both Jews and Christians often have found themselves face to face with imminent death—whether on the rack or in the colosseum, whether on a cross or at the hands of a hate-filled mob. Thus, we can identify well with the story described in this book. Some Christian commentators have dismissed the book of Esther as something for the Jews alone. But it is a book for all God’s people, whoever and wherever they are. The book comforts those who experience suffering and persecution.

ILLUSTRATION: With their awareness of last day events, Seventh-day Adventists have been drawn to the story of Esther in a particular way. In old Battle Creek days, Handel’s *Esther* oratorio was more popular among the youth of the college and Tabernacle Church than the composer’s *Messiah*. In her early teens, Ellen White was encouraged greatly by a sermon on Esther that she heard at a Methodist camp meeting. (See *Life Sketches*, p. 22.)



NOTE the description of the Jews that Haman gave when he was seeking to have the Jews destroyed. Esther 3:8.

It is ironic that the separateness of the Jews was the reason given for their destruction—but it likewise was the basis of their indestructibility. In much

the same way, just before Christ comes, the uniqueness of His true followers will be the reason that they are so hated. Yet, for the same reason, they will be out of reach of their enemies.

ILLUMINATION: “Those who endeavor to obey all the commandments of God will be opposed and derided. They can stand only in God. In order to endure the trial before them, they must understand the will of God as revealed in His word; they can honor Him only as they have a right conception of His character, government, and purposes, and act in accordance with them. None but those who have fortified the mind with the truths of the Bible will stand through the last great conflict. To every soul will come the searching test: Shall I obey God rather than men? The decisive hour is even now at hand. Are our feet planted on the rock of God’s immutable word? Are we prepared to stand firm in defense of the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus?”—*The Great Controversy*, pp. 593, 594.

What did Mordecai ask Esther to do? Esther 4:8.

Recognizing the true nature of the situation, Mordecai saw Esther as the one hope for human intervention. As in the case of Naomi and Ruth, God would work His providence through the actions of human beings. Again, however, the situation was complicated by a Persian law: people could not go in to see the king unless summoned—not if they expected to return alive. The constant danger of assassination had made the king and guards understandably cautious. No one could be allowed to approach the king unless that person was known to be loyal and safe. Thus Esther’s reply to Mordecai’s suggestion was urgent: “All the king’s courtiers and the people of the provinces are aware that if any person, man or woman, enters the king’s presence in the inner court unbidden, there is one law only: that person shall be put to death, unless the king stretches out to him the golden sceptre; then and then only shall he live. It is now thirty days since I myself was called to go to the king” (Esther 4:11, NEB).

Although Esther had won the king’s favor and become queen, a question had entered her mind as to whether she still enjoyed his favor. For some 30 days he had not summoned her. By implication, that seems to have been an unusually long time. Yet here is her adoptive father urging her to enter the king’s presence to plead on behalf of her people.



III. MORDECAI’S REBUTTAL AND ESTHER’S ACQUIESCENCE (Esther 4:13-17).

When told of Esther’s reticence to approach the king, what was Mordecai’s response? What were the implications of his words? Esther 4:13, 14.

Mordecai was a student of history. He knew how God had wrought on behalf of His people in times past. He knew of the many hopeless situations that had been turned into victory. Thus, the message he sent to Esther is significant.

First, Mordecai pointed out the unlikelihood of Esther and her family surviving if the decree was carried out. Thus it came down to a matter of running a calculated risk by approaching the king or of facing almost certain destruction later. Secondly, Mordecai's knowledge of history, his faith in God, and his certainty of the favored status of the Jews made it impossible for him to believe that God would allow them to be annihilated. He assured Esther that deliverance would come in some form or other. Finally, Mordecai argued on the basis of how truly phenomenal it was that a Jewess should be queen at a time when Jewish needs were so great.

THINK IT THROUGH: Mordecai's statement to Esther that "if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place" (Esther 4:14, NIV) reveals his belief that a higher power is in charge of history and that history can be overruled. But why does he not state it more clearly? Why does the book seem to go out of its way to avoid mentioning God and religion?

One thing that has puzzled and disturbed readers of Esther has been the book's pattern of ignoring God and the features of Old Testament religion. The author mentions the king of Persia 130 times, but the King of the universe not even once. Nor does he allude to the usual themes of law or covenant. The book does not speak of angels or the afterlife. Nothing is said of such things as love, kindness, mercy, and forgiveness—concepts prominent in the rest of the Old Testament. Perhaps most strange of all, this story of God's people in a time of danger does not even talk about prayer. The only religious practice it does portray is that of fasting.

Esther is not the only book in the Bible that does this. The Song of Solomon does not mention the name of God either, with the possible exception of 8:6 where the phrase "vehement flame" (RSV) or "mighty flame" (NIV) could be translated "a flame of Yah (Yahweh)" or "like the very flame of the Lord" (NIV footnote). From such examples, we see that God is willing to allow His spokesmen at times to present His presence by implication, as well as more directly.

The authors of Esther and the Song of Solomon had their reasons for presenting their inspired material as they did. We must not judge Scripture by our own ideas of how God's penmen should have written.

ILLUMINATION: "The Lord gave His word in just the way He wanted it to come. He gave it through different writers, each having his own individuality. . . . Their testimonies are brought together in one Book, and are like the testimonies in a social meeting. They do not represent things in just the same style. Each has an experience of his own, and this diversity broadens and deepens the knowledge that is brought out to meet the necessities of varied minds. The thoughts expressed have not a set uniformity, as if cast in an iron mold, making the very hearing monotonous. In such uniformity there would be a loss of grace and distinctive beauty."—*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, pp. 21, 22.

Given such a clear picture of her predicament and that of her people, how did Esther reply? Esther 4:15, 16.

The resolution contained in those simple words, "If I perish, I perish," shows Esther at her best. Although her life reveals human imperfections, when it becomes a matter of life or death, when there is no alternative course of action, all vacillation ceases. What must be done, must be done.

What Bible character went through a crisis similar to the one faced by the Jews in Persia? How was his crisis resolved? How will Christians at the end of time prevail? Genesis 32 and 33.

"Such will be the experience of God's people in their final struggle with the powers of evil. God will test their faith, their perseverance, their confidence in His power to deliver them. Satan will endeavor to terrify them with the thought that their cases are hopeless; that their sins have been too great to receive pardon. They will have a deep sense of their shortcomings, and as they review their lives their hopes will sink. But remembering the greatness of God's mercy, and their own sincere repentance, they will plead His promises made through Christ to helpless, repenting sinners. Their faith will not fail because their prayers are not immediately answered. They will lay hold of the strength of God, as Jacob laid hold of the Angel, and the language of their souls will be, 'I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me.' . . .

"Jacob prevailed because he was persevering and determined. His experience testifies to the power of importunate prayer. It is now that we are to learn this lesson of prevailing prayer, of unyielding faith."—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 202, 203.

What significant preparations did Jacob make for meeting Esau?

"While Jacob was thus bowed down with trouble, the Lord directed him to journey southward to Bethel. The thought of this place reminded the patriarch not only of his vision of the angels and of God's promises of mercy, but also of the vow which he had made there, that the Lord should be his God. He determined that before going to this sacred spot his household should be freed from the defilement of idolatry. He therefore gave instruction to all in the encampment, 'Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean and change your garments: and let us arise, and go up to Bethel.' . . .

"With deep emotion Jacob repeated the story of his first visit to Bethel, when he left his father's tent a lonely wanderer, fleeing for his life, and how the Lord had appeared to him in the night vision. As he reviewed the wonderful dealings of God with him, his own heart was softened, his children also were touched by a subduing power; he had taken the most effectual way to prepare them to join in the worship of God when they should arrive at Bethel."—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 205.

God does not always work in the manner or at the speed that would seem appropriate to us. Naomi must have wondered why God had allowed her husband and sons to die. In the time of Esther many must have been puzzled as to why God did not intervene to thwart Haman's plans before he had involved the king in them. Instead God chose not to remove the threat immediately. He wanted His people to appreciate fully the helplessness of their

situation. Only then would they grasp fully the fact that all deliverance comes from the Lord. That is a lesson that we as His people today also must learn. It is easy for us to try to solve our own problems without asking God for His help and guidance.



FURTHER STUDY AND MEDITATION: Read the following passage from *The Story of Redemption*. Then, answer the questions that follow.

“Jacob and Esau represent two classes: Jacob, the righteous, and Esau, the wicked. Jacob’s distress when he learned that Esau was marching against him with four hundred men, represents the trouble of the righteous as the degree goes forth to put them to death, just before the coming of the Lord. As the wicked gather about them, they will be filled with anguish, for, like Jacob, they can see no escape for their lives.”

“All who desire the blessing of God, as did Jacob, and will lay hold of the promises, as he did, and be as earnest and persevering as he was, will succeed as he succeeded. There is so little exercise of true faith and so little of the weight of truth resting upon many professed believers because they are indolent in spiritual things. They are unwilling to make exertions, to deny self, to agonize before God, to pray long and earnestly for the blessing, and therefore they do not obtain it. That faith which will live through the time of trouble must be daily in exercise now. Those who do not make strong efforts now to exercise persevering faith, will be wholly unprepared to exercise that faith which will enable them to stand in the day of trouble.”—*The Story of Redemption*, pp. 97, 99.

What is the single most important thing for us to be doing to prepare for the time of trouble?

How can my faith be strengthened to believe that God is just as able to save today as He was in the time of Jacob or Esau?

SUMMARY: In the space provided, write your own summary of this week’s lesson:

APPLICATION

- The experience of the Jews at the time of Esther should encourage us that God is just as willing and capable to deliver today as He was then. God worked through human beings who were types of the Saviour. But they resolved merely passing crises in the ongoing great controversy. Jesus will bring an eternal deliverance when He rescues His people at the Second Coming.
- Am I prepared for the “time of Jacob’s trouble” just ahead?

The Winding Road to Deliverance

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Esther 5-7.



MEMORY TEXT: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord" (Isa. 55:8).

CENTRAL THOUGHT: Although God never deserts us when we face difficulty, we often cannot understand why He does things as He does. As did the book of Ruth, the book of Esther reveals that God sometimes works out His will in indirect ways.

OVERVIEW: Esther 5-7			
5:1-8	5:9-14	6:1-14	7:1-10
Esther invites the king and Haman to a banquet	Haman plans to kill Mordecai	Haman forced to honor Mordecai	The plot uncovered; Haman executed

INTRODUCTION: When Ahasuerus (Xerxes) issued the decree that the Jewish people were to be exterminated, Queen Esther was the likely person for the Jews to turn to. However, she hesitated to approach the king because of the law forbidding that any subject enter his presence unbidden. To our way of thinking, it would seem an easy thing for God to arrange for the king to call Esther. We can imagine any number of ways that could have been arranged whereby she would have been able to plead her case without risk to herself.

But God does not always work in the manner or at the speed that would seem appropriate to us. He did not immediately remove the threat to His people. He wanted them to appreciate fully the hopelessness of their situation in order that when deliverance came, they would understand more fully the magnitude of the plan of salvation. Furthermore, if we could pull back the curtain of events, we would see a much deeper involvement on God's part than we otherwise might realize.



I. ESTHER INVITES THE KING AND HAMAN TO A BANQUET (Esther 5:1-8).

What happened when Esther made her planned unauthorized approach to the King? Esther 5:1, 2.

Some historians suggest that an unauthorized approach to the Persian king was not categorically forbidden. If it was illegal, the guards would have executed summarily any would-be entrant. Instead, it is suggested that people could approach the king when he sat on his throne. But in doing so, they were staking everything on winning the king's favor.

One description of how this worked pictures a throne room with guards lining each side and the king sitting at the end opposite the door. If an unbidden party entered the room, the guards fell in behind the person, with spears lowered. The danger of assassination was ever present for the king. He and his guards always had to be alert. If some indication of his favor had not been given by the time the unbidden caller neared the throne, the guards would execute the intruder.

THINK IT THROUGH: Read Esther 5:3, 4. Was there any particular wisdom in Esther's not pleading her case right then and there? If she was trying to ensure that the king would be in an environment conducive to the granting of her request, would that be a lack of faith? What is the proper balance between human effort and trusting God to do everything for us?

It is apparent (see Esther 5:5) that Esther used the three days that had elapsed since Mordecai warned her of the death decree for more than fasting. Esther's banquet was ready a short time after her confrontation with the king. She planned carefully how she would be most likely to accomplish her ends. God expects those who perform His will to plan their actions carefully and well.

ILLUMINATION: "The crisis that Esther faced demanded quick, earnest action; but both she and Mordecai realized that unless God should work mightily in their behalf, their own efforts would be unavailing. So Esther took time for communion with God, the source of her strength."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 601.

When the meal was completed, what question did Ahasuerus ask Esther? What was her answer? Esther 5:6-8.

"Half my kingdom" is a polite Oriental exaggeration not meant to be taken too literally, yet it was characteristic of Xerxes. Herodotus tells us that once the king extravagantly offered his mistress Artaynte anything she wanted. The woman demanded the mantle his queen had personally woven for him. Xerxes tried to offer her "cities instead, and gold in abundance, and an army for none but herself to command. . . . But as he could not move her, he gave her the mantle; and she, rejoicing greatly in the gift, went flaunting her finery."—Herodotus IX. 104-11, quoted in Moore, *Esther*, Anchor Bible Series, vol. 7B (NY: Doubleday, 1975), p. 55.

Such stories reveal much about the character of the man who let himself be used in a plot to destroy God's people.

II. HAMAN PLANS TO KILL MORDECAI (Esther 5:9-14).

What was Haman's reaction to the turn of events? Esther 5:9-13.

ILLUSTRATION: Psychiatrist Tom Harris tells the story of a family who were sitting at the supper table about to enjoy some of their favorite cookies. When the cookie jar came around to the youngest child, who was the last to be served, he withdrew the last cookie—only to discover that it had a small piece missing. Instead of being grateful for the amount of good cookie he did have, the youngster flung the cookie to the floor, sobbing, "My cookie's all broke."

Haman's behavior was not altogether different from that of the little boy. He had been made second in command in the empire. People did homage to him wherever he went—with only one exception, Mordecai. That one thing had become such an obsession with him that all else was insignificant. He was willing to do anything to be rid of this one irritant in his life—even to murdering an entire race, if that is what it took.

What advice was given to Haman by his family and friends? Esther 5:14.

III. HAMAN FORCED TO HONOR MORDECAI (Esther 6:1-14).

What led to the discovery that Mordecai had not been rewarded? Esther 6:1-3.

ILLUMINATION: "That night a heavenly angel kept the king awake. Ahasuerus tossed and turned. He counted sheep. He thought of Marathon and Salamis. But still he couldn't sleep. Finally as a last resort he ordered his valet to read to him from the king's annals. A more boring book he couldn't have found, and the king was just getting drowsy when the scribe came to an interesting passage.

"Some time before, the valet read, the king's gatekeeper, Mordecai, had overheard two of his majesty's trusted advisers plotting to kill him. Mordecai had reported it to the queen. She had told the king. And the royal secret service had frustrated the plot before it hatched.

"Has anything been done to this man to show our appreciation?" asked the king.

"Nothing, your majesty."—H. M. S. Richards, Jr., *Hostages in a Strange Land* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1981), p. 29.

According to the Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides, it was a point of honor for a Persian king to reward his benefactors. Herodotus gives several examples of Xerxes bestowing such rewards.



Who did Haman think the king wanted to honor? Esther 6:6.

Haman's pride led him to jump to a conclusion that in turn led to his ultimate destruction. Sin causes its victims to view reality through self-centered eyes.

How does Esther 6:4-12 illustrate the truth of Proverbs 26:27?

The crown or royal crest that was placed on the horse's head can now be understood from friezes excavated in the ruins of the Persian capital. It was a special arrangement of the hairs of the mane that formed a topknot between the animal's ears.

Plutarch records an incident that sounds remarkably like the suggestion Haman made. The ancient writer states that when Xerxes offered Demaratus the Spartan a special favor, the Greek asked to have a crown placed on his head and be led through the city in the same manner as the king was. (Based on Goldman, "Esther," *The Five Magilloth*, Soncino Books of the Bible, p. 224.)

Note how Haman discussed his humiliation with his family and friends. Esther 6:12, 13.

How did those who earlier had encouraged Haman in his scheme now react to his news? Esther 6:13.

Haman's friends began distancing themselves from him. They could see the way events were turning. The prime minister's world was beginning to collapse about him. But he did not yet know the extent of his disaster.

In the Orient, it was the custom for a host to send an escort to accompany a guest to a feast. While Haman was being subjected to predictions of doom in his household, the royal escort arrived. Verse 14 may seem incidental to the story. However, it probably was because one of the king's eunuchs had been to Haman's house and seen the preparations that were being made for Mordecai's execution that Haman was executed later that night on the very gallows prepared for his Jewish enemy.



IV. THE PLOT UNCOVERED; HAMAN EXECUTED (Esther 7:1-10).

Jesus said that we are to be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves (Matt. 10:16). Esther certainly met that criterion. Study carefully Esther's comment to the king on behalf of her people (Esther 7:3-4).

ILLUMINATION: "It mattered little to the king that thousands of his subjects were to be slain; their interests were no concern of his. He had been content with Haman's accusation that the Jews were lawless. But if the decree touched Esther—that was another matter. Her character, her loyalty and devotion, were far above suspicion. She meant something to him. The

queen handled the matter with tact and skill, introducing the subject in a manner calculated to appeal personally to the king. Her life was threatened; she, the queen, was in mortal danger!"—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 483.

THINK IT THROUGH: How would you have approached the topic? Do you think a more direct approach would have been as effective? Why or why not?

Haman's decree used forceful language: The people had permission "to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and little children" (Esther 3:13, NIV). No doubt, as Esther began to reveal the plot to the king, Haman, who was sitting at the banquet table, began to notice a familiar ring in the words she was using. Having not previously known that she was a Jewess, he may have been caught off balance momentarily— but then the awful truth must have dawned. The humiliation of leading Mordecai through the street was nothing compared to the crisis he now faced.

What did Esther imply in her words quoted Esther 7:4?

She implied that if Haman had led the king to sell the Jews as slaves, she would not have intervened in the sale because it would have cost the king revenue—and Xerxes desperately needed funds for his wars with the Greeks. But the destruction of the Jews would be a far greater loss to his empire. It was an argument that he could understand. However, there was an even more effective one—the fact that his queen was herself one of the people destined for destruction.





What was the king's reaction when the full plot was revealed? Esther 7:5, 6.

"Ahasuerus has not known that his queen, Esther, is a Jewess, for Mordecai instructed her not to make known her people. And the king appeared not to know that the people he sold to Haman were Jews. For he saw no reason why Haman should not enjoy proclaiming 'Mordecai the Jew' in the public square as 'the man whom the king delights to honor.' Not able himself to bring pertinent facts together, he questions his queen, 'Who is he, and where is he, that would presume to do this?' The fact that Haman is present as a guest has seemed to preclude his being the killer. Esther may have contrived it so, to bring the king's anger to white heat before he learns that his court favorite is the offender.

"It may be now that Esther turns toward Haman, quailing on the floor. No doubt pointing the accusing finger she denounces him, 'A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!'

"Those 'certain people' whom the king sold to Haman for ten thousand talents of silver are no longer a mere item of state business. They are living, quivering, human flesh. They have loves and fears, sensations and emotions. They are people like his lovely queen Esther. To destroy, to slay, to annihilate creatures like this? For silver? Ahasuerus' heart revolts at the thought. The one who led him into this, he is resolved, must bear the consequences."—Paul T. Gibbs, *Men Come Alive* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1968), pp. 126, 127.

When the king momentarily left the banquet hall to try to control his rage and piece together the puzzle, what did Haman do and how did the king misinterpret his intentions? Esther 7:7, 8.

Haman, who had sought to destroy an entire ethnic group because one man refused to kneel, now found himself pleading for his own life—on his knees. The king either misinterpreted Haman's pleading as an assault on Esther, or deliberately interpreted it that way in order to add to Haman's misery. Perhaps Ahasuerus sensed that a dangerous person such as Haman could just as easily plot the king's destruction as he did the Jews'. In Haman's impulsive act he found an excuse to justify eliminating the potential threat of the prime minister.

One last fateful part of the drama had to be played out before the curtain closed on Haman. The royal escort who accompanied him to the banquet casually commented to the enraged king, "A gallows seventy-five feet high stands by Haman's house. He had it made for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king.' The king said, 'Hang him on it!' So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided" (Esther 7:9, 10, NIV).

Esther, the Persian king, and Harbonah, the eunuch were the human instruments in God's plan of events. Seeming coincidences actually were the outworking of divine providence. God works in similar ways in the lives of each one of us. But we may not recognize the touch of the divine hand as

such until eternity. Jesus is working for each one of us as surely as He did for Esther and God's people in her time.

FRD

FURTHER STUDY AND MEDITATION: "Through Esther the queen the Lord accomplished a mighty deliverance for His people. At a time when it seemed that no power could save them, Esther and the women associated with her, by fasting and prayer and prompt action, met the issue, and brought salvation to their people.

"A study of women's work in connection with the cause of God in Old Testament times will teach us lessons that will enable us to meet emergencies in the work today. We may not be brought into such a critical and prominent place as were the people of God in the time of Esther; but often converted women can act an important part in more humble positions (Letter 22, 1911)." — Ellen White comments, *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1140.

SUMMARY: Summarize this lesson in two or three sentences:

APPLICATION

- Although the death of Haman did not completely deliver Esther and the Jews in Susa from trouble—the decree still remained—God had worked on their behalf to remove their obstacle. Similarly, although we still are in this world of sin, Christ's death and resurrection has begun our deliverance.
- What can I do in a practical way this week to share the thrill of my deliverance and redemption with those I meet?

NOTES:

***Open the Wells of Learning at
West Indies College, Jamaica***

THIRTEENTH SABBATH OFFERING, DEC. 19

Remembering Our Deliverance

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Esther 8-10.



MEMORY TEXT: "Give thanks unto the Lord; call upon his name: make known his deeds among the people. Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him: talk ye of all his wondrous works" (Psalm 105:1, 2).

CENTRAL THOUGHT: The deliverance of God's people in the past is our assurance of our deliverance in the future. As His people, we continually need to refresh our memories of God's actions in the past. Such remembrance will sustain and encourage us as we meet new trials and struggles. The rescue of Esther and her people is a part of every Christian's heritage.

OVERVIEW: Esther 8-10			
8:1-14	8:15—9:16	9:17-32	10:1-3
Mordecai prepares a counter decree	The Jews slaughter their enemies	Feast of Purim instituted	Record of Mordecai's administration

INTRODUCTION: Psalm 3 describes in poetic verse the type of situation the Jews faced following Haman's decree to have them slaughtered:

"Lord, how are they increased that trouble me! many are they that rise up against me.

"Many there be which say of my soul, There is no help for him in God.

"But thou, O Lord, art a shield for me; my glory, and the lifter up of mine head.

"I cried unto the Lord with my voice, and he heard me out of his holy hill. . . .

"I laid me down and slept; I awaked; for the Lord sustained me.

"I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people, that have set themselves against me round about.

"Arise, O Lord; save me, O my God: for thou hast smitten all mine enemies upon the cheek bone; thou hast broken the teeth of the ungodly.

"Salvation belongeth unto the Lord: thy blessing is upon thy people."

Haman's persecution of God's people ceased with his death, but the law he had instigated remained in force. In this lesson we shall see how God's hand arranged human events to nullify that law.

I. MORDECAI PREPARES A COUNTER DECREE (Esther 8:1-14).

What belated reward did the king give Mordecai for saving his life? Esther 8:1, 2.

The book of Esther demonstrates how fickle life is and how fortunes change quickly. Vashti is queen one day, banished the next. Esther, an ordinary young woman, suddenly finds herself queen. Mordecai, a mere attendant at court who refuses to bow to a haughty prime minister, finds himself elevated to the position of prime minister overnight.

Both success and failure lurk in the wings, waiting to spring forth.

There is a right time for every task or opportunity. What happens when we allow the right moment to slip by? Eccl. 9:11.

This does not mean that life is nothing more than mindless chance. As we have seen in the book of Ruth, what may appear to be accident or coincidence can be the working of God. Ruth “happened” to begin gleaning in the field of Boaz, the near kinsman who would redeem her from widowhood. Esther “happened” to become queen during a time when her people would need an intercessor, and the king “happened” to be unable to sleep one night and turned to the court annals to pass the time.

Haman believed that he could control history through the throw of the dice. We see that God overruled the way the dice fell. Joyce Baldwin points out that the story of Esther tells us “that chance comes to us from the hand of God.”—Baldwin, *Esther*, p. 52.

God’s “chance” is in our favor. He seeks our good. The books of Ruth and Esther reveal that God’s “chance” knows no national or cultural barriers. These books portray God at work in lands other than Israel. Controlling history, He seeks salvation and establishes justice everywhere. He works out His purposes through human initiative. Ruth and Esther, Boaz and Mordecai, each one through his or her efforts, brought God’s will into being; brought into reality those plans He had in mind.

THINK IT THROUGH: How do we sometimes thwart and sometimes fulfill God’s plans for our lives and the lives of those around us?

What further request did Esther make? Esther 8:3-6.

Because evidences of royal favor have been given to Esther and Mordecai, she does not seem hesitant to approach the king the second time.

It was a tradition that a Medo-Persian law could not be revoked. How did the king get around this problem? Esther 8:7, 8.

The wording of the decree prepared by Mordecai permitted “Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them and their women and children; and to plunder the property of their enemies. The day appointed for the Jews to do this in all the provinces of King Xerxes was the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar” (Esther 8:11, 12, NIV).

Any killing was to be limited to one day. This would help prevent the Jews’ defense of themselves from plunging the empire into a blood feud that could devastate families, villages, and even entire peoples.



II. THE JEWS SLAUGHTER THEIR ENEMIES (Esther 8:15-9:16).

How did the people—and the Jews in particular—respond to the new decree? Esther 8:16, 17.

To what extreme did some citizens of the Persian empire go to protect themselves? Esther 8:17.

As in the book of Ruth, we see people of other nations coming to join God’s people. At this point many joined out of fear, but others in the Persian empire came to the Jews because they were attracted to the faith of the true God.

When we read statements such as that found in Matthew 23:15, we sometimes assume that the Jews did not witness to the people around them. Actually they did, drawing many to identify with God’s people. Some estimates suggest that one-tenth of the Roman empire was Jewish by the time of Christ. Much of that growth had resulted from conversions. But even with this large growth there was much more that God’s ancient people could have done. Their failure to accomplish that larger mission was a disappointment to God.

THINK IT THROUGH: Could there be a message in the Jews’ failure for God’s people today? Has our witness to the nations and peoples around us been as strong and effective as it should have been?

Study carefully Esther 9:2-4. What dilemma do you see facing those who could be considered enemies of the Jews?

While it is true that the decree to destroy the Jews was not rescinded but merely countermanded, with permission for the Jews to defend themselves, it also is true that anyone would have been foolish to have risked an attack—and it appears that none did. “No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them” (Esther 9:2, NIV). With the provincial officials, satraps, governors, and royal officials favoring the Jews and the prime minister being a Jew it would be almost the equivalent of treason to have made an attack.



What action or policies on the part of Mordecai do you think might explain how he became so well known and so great as stated in Esther 9:4? Compare Esther 10:3.

ILLUSTRATION: Archeologist S. H. Horn points out that the occurrence of the name Mordecai and the presence of prominent and wealthy Jews in the days of Artaxerxes I and Darius II could be evidence of the actual success and historicity of Mordecai the Jew. (Based on *Biblical Research* 9 (1964), pp. 14, 15.)

The Jews prospered in Persia and Babylonia. Prosperity kept many of them from returning to Palestine. On the other hand many devout Jews who remained there helped support the Jewish communities in Palestine up until the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

When the day of slaughter came, how did the Jews relate to their enemies? Esther 9:5-10, 16. Do you feel their actions were justified? Or was it taking unfair advantage of the situation? Why?

Because the decree prepared by Mordecai granted permission to kill those "that might attack them" (Esther 8:11, NIV), some feel that the Jewish action must have been defensive only. They contend that despite the statement of Esther 8:17 and 9:3, 4, there were those—some 75,000—who actually risked attacking them. Whatever happened, the Jews did not respond as others would have. The Bible emphasizes that the Jews took no plunder, the normal custom of the time. God's people sought only to protect themselves, not to become wealthy from the property of others. It would have been a natural temptation to use the second decree as an excuse to attack someone having much property, but God's people resisted the temptation.

The book of Esther reports the deaths of men only, not of women and children. The Jews were determined not to commit the kind of genocide that Haman had in mind. They were fighting for their lives, not for wealth or ethnic advantage. The book indicates no general hostility to the king or the Persian populace, only to Haman's supporters.

What question did the king ask Esther at the end of the day? What was her reply? What implication does her reply have as to whether the Jews were merely defenders or were aggressors? Esther 9:11-13.

Obviously the Jewish people wanted to settle certain scores once and for all. They wanted it clearly understood that they were not a group to be trifled with. But the Scripture twice says that they did not touch the plunder (Esther 9:10, 16).

To have taken booty would have been to create hostility against them-

selves. Such hostility would linger on, eventually erupting in new Hamans and new death decrees. It would have had an even worse effect on the Jews. Fighting for plunder would have clouded their thinking to the extent that they would have been unable to perceive the divine glory of their deliverance. They would not have thought of what God was doing for them. Instead they would have thought about what riches they could seize.



III. FEAST OF PURIM INSTITUTED (Esther 9:17-32).

What did Mordecai and Esther establish to memorialize the deliverance of God's people? Esther 9:20, 21.

How were the people to observe the new holiday? Esther 9:22.

The Jews instituted a feast to celebrate their deliverance, calling it Purim. The name in itself insults the powers of the pagan deities. Haman, in his superstition, had wanted to find *the* perfect day to accomplish his evil purpose. After a prolonged process of casting lots he had pinpointed the time. However, the day that was to be one of destruction and slaughter *of* the Jews, turned out to be a day of destruction and slaughter *by* the Jews. Purim, celebrated to this day, is an annual reminder of God's power to bring deliverance that thwarts the plans of the enemy. Christians need to be reminded continually of the deliverance that God has provided through Jesus and of the fact that Jesus gained the victory over Satan at the cross.

Esther 9:17-32 essentially describes the how and why of the feast of Purim. Note that it was to be a time of joyous giving and sharing. A loving God wants even the special occasions we set aside to remember Him to be happy ones.

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND: The modern feast of Purim is one of the highlights of the Jewish religious year. (In the years before the birth of Christ, it was also called Mordecai Day.) As was done in the time of Esther, gifts are given, and there is great rejoicing.

Purim has many characteristics in common with the Christian celebration of Christmas. Besides gifts for the children, housewives send friends and relatives platters of food. The people hold special parties and costume balls.

The Jewish people gather in the synagogues, where parts or all of the account of Esther is read. Because the name Haman is anathema to the Jews, a little game is played whereby the reader of the story lets his listeners know when they are approaching his name. The congregation begins to stamp, clap, hiss, boo, and in general make noise because they must not hear the name when it is read. Normally, traditional Judaism excuses women from attending the synagogues because it believes that it is even more important for the woman to remain at home to take care of small children. But at Purim, women are obligated to attend because it was through a woman that deliverance was accomplished for the Jews in Persia.

The festival of Purim has helped the Jews to endure much persecution. It

has encouraged them when all seemed hopeless, when everything appeared lost.



THINK IT THROUGH: What can God's people today learn from this? Do we regularly and systematically remember and celebrate God's leading in our lives? What high points can you think of in Seventh-day Adventist history where God has worked in dramatic ways? How could we memorialize such occasions?

Joyce Baldwin wrote of the book of Esther "that a plot intended to destroy [God's people] resulted in a festival which helped to unite and sustain them as a people."—Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 7. How can persecution unite God's people today? How can such experiences sustain them?

IV. RECORD OF MORDECAI'S ADMINISTRATION (Esther 10:1-3).

Read Esther 10:3. Is it appropriate for God's people to occupy high places in government? To what extent should they seek to advance the cause of their religion while in those places? Was it a positive or negative characteristic for Mordecai to seek to promote the welfare of the Jews?

ILLUMINATION: "Mordecai was given the position of honor formerly occupied by Haman. He 'was next unto King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren' (Esther 10:3); and he sought to promote the welfare of Israel. Thus did God bring His chosen people once more into favor at the Medo-Persian court, making possible the carrying out of His purpose to restore them to their own land."—*Prophets and Kings*, 602, 605.

"There is no limit to the usefulness of one who, by putting self aside, makes room for the working of the Holy Spirit upon his heart, and lives a life wholly consecrated to God."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 250.



FURTHER STUDY AND MEDITATION: "God's purpose for the children growing up beside our hearths is wider, deeper, higher, than our restricted vision has comprehended. From the humblest lot those whom He has seen faithful have in time past been called to witness for Him in the world's highest places. And many a lad of today, growing up as did Daniel in his Judean home, studying God's word and His works, and learning the lessons of faithful service, will yet stand in legislative assemblies, in halls of justice, or in royal courts as a witness for the King of kings. Multitudes will be called to a wider ministry. The whole world is opening to the gospel. . . . From every quarter of this world of ours comes the cry of sin-stricken hearts for a knowledge of the God of love. . . . It rests with us who have received the knowledge, with our children to whom we may impart it, to answer their cry. To every household and every school, to every parent, teacher, and child upon whom has shone the light of the gospel, comes at this crisis the

question put to Esther the queen at that momentous crisis in Israel's history, 'Who knoweth whether *thou* art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' "—*Education*, pp. 262, 263.

SUMMARY: This quarter we have followed two strong themes running through the books of Ruth and Esther: 1) we have a God who seeks the salvation of His people from distress, and 2) we have a God who works among and through ordinary people.

In these Old Testament books we have traced the outlines of the greater deliverance that God wrought later on the rough-hewn wood of the cross of Golgotha. What Jesus hinted at in the time of ancient Israel, He strikingly revealed in the New Testament—Ruth was a token of the Gentiles that would flock to the church, Esther's experience provided a foretaste of the deliverance that, absolutely guaranteed by the cross, will rescue God's people from the tyranny of sin and bring that tyranny to a final conclusion.

In both books, what appeared to be coincidence or blind chance turned out to be God at work in human events. Nothing ultimately can destroy His plans for the deliverance of His people. He always controls events—even when, as to Naomi, He seems far away from us. We may question Him as she did, but we also can have the assurance Mordecai did that God will work things out. That is good news—wonderful news! The books of Ruth and Esther tell us that our Saviour always is with His children. We call Ruth a love story—but so is Esther. Both bring us the story of God's love.

One of the reasons that God permitted the humanness of His servants to be recorded was that He wanted to show that He can work through very human people no matter what the situation. Perhaps Mordecai should not have told Esther to hide her ethnic and religious identity. But he did so. God still was able to work through the situation Mordecai created. As for Esther, is not the most important thing the fact that when the crisis came, she rose to the responsibility and the task God set before her? Is this not the pattern we see elsewhere in Scripture's heroes and heroines?

APPLICATION

- The secret of all those who may be modern Esthers is that, whereas they are fallible human beings, they are willing to be His instruments in His divine plan. They listen to His calling. The voice of God also speaks in each of our own lives. Will we respond?
- What does the inclusion of the book of Esther in the Bible tell us about God's attitudes and dealings with us? How can we have the courage to witness that Esther demonstrated?

NOTES:

Lessons for First Quarter, 1988

Sabbath School members who have not received a copy of the Adult Lessons for the first quarter of 1988 will be helped by the following outline in studying the first two lessons. The title of this series is "Bound for the Promised Land."

First Lesson:

"GOD PREPARES A DELIVERER"

MEMORY TEXT: Hebrews 11:23.

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Exodus 1:1 through 2:25.

CENTRAL THOUGHT: No matter how hopelessly we seem to be held in the bondage of sin, God has provided a Redeemer who can deliver us.

OUTLINE:

- I. Bondage and Oppression (Ex. 1:1-22).
- II. A Deliverer Is Born (Ex. 2:1-10).
- III. Preparing for Deliverance (Ex. 2:11-25).

Second Lesson:

"CALLED AT A BURNING BUSH"

MEMORY TEXT: 1 Cor. 1:27.

THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Exodus 3:1 through 4:31.

CENTRAL THOUGHT: God uses ordinary things and humble people to accomplish extraordinary results in His cause. God has a plan in life for each of us that is as specific as was the responsibility to which He called Moses.

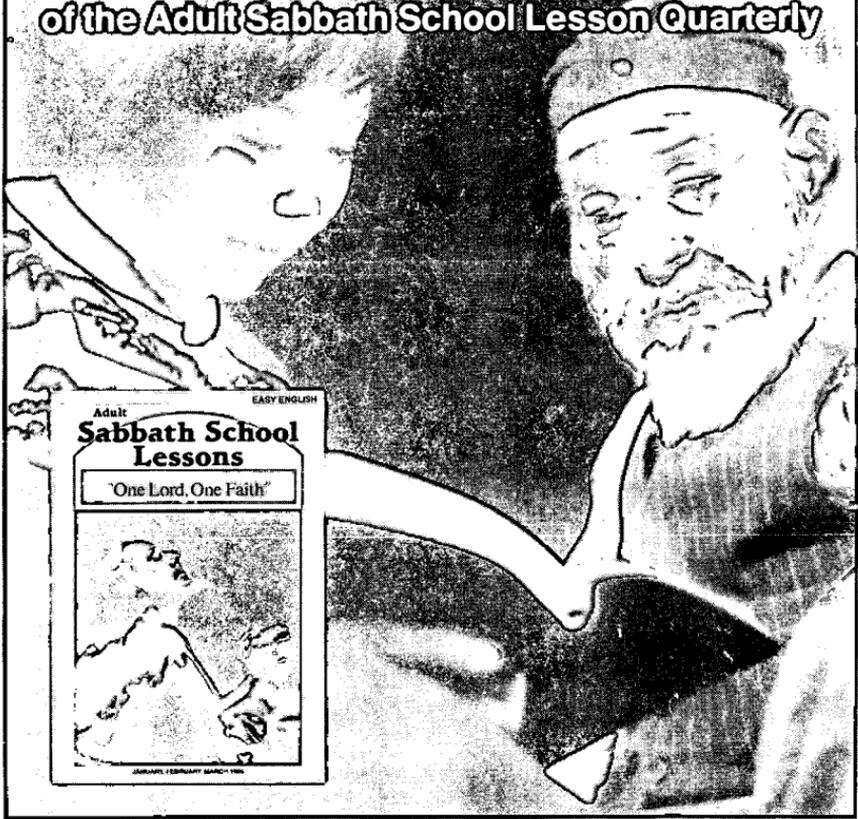
OUTLINE:

- I. God Calls Moses at a Burning Bush (Ex. 3:1-10).
- II. Moses Makes Excuses (Ex. 3:11—4:17).
- III. Moses Returns to Egypt (Ex. 4:18-31).

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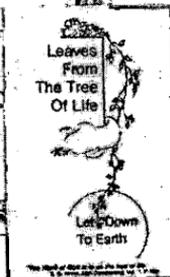
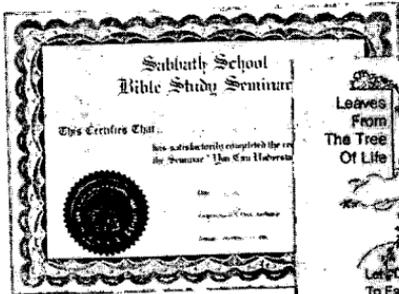
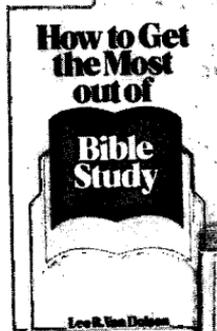
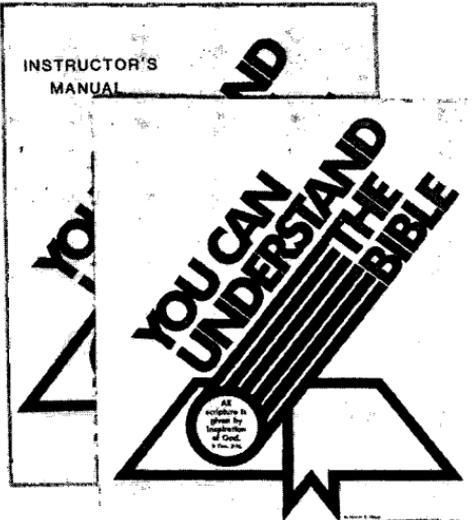
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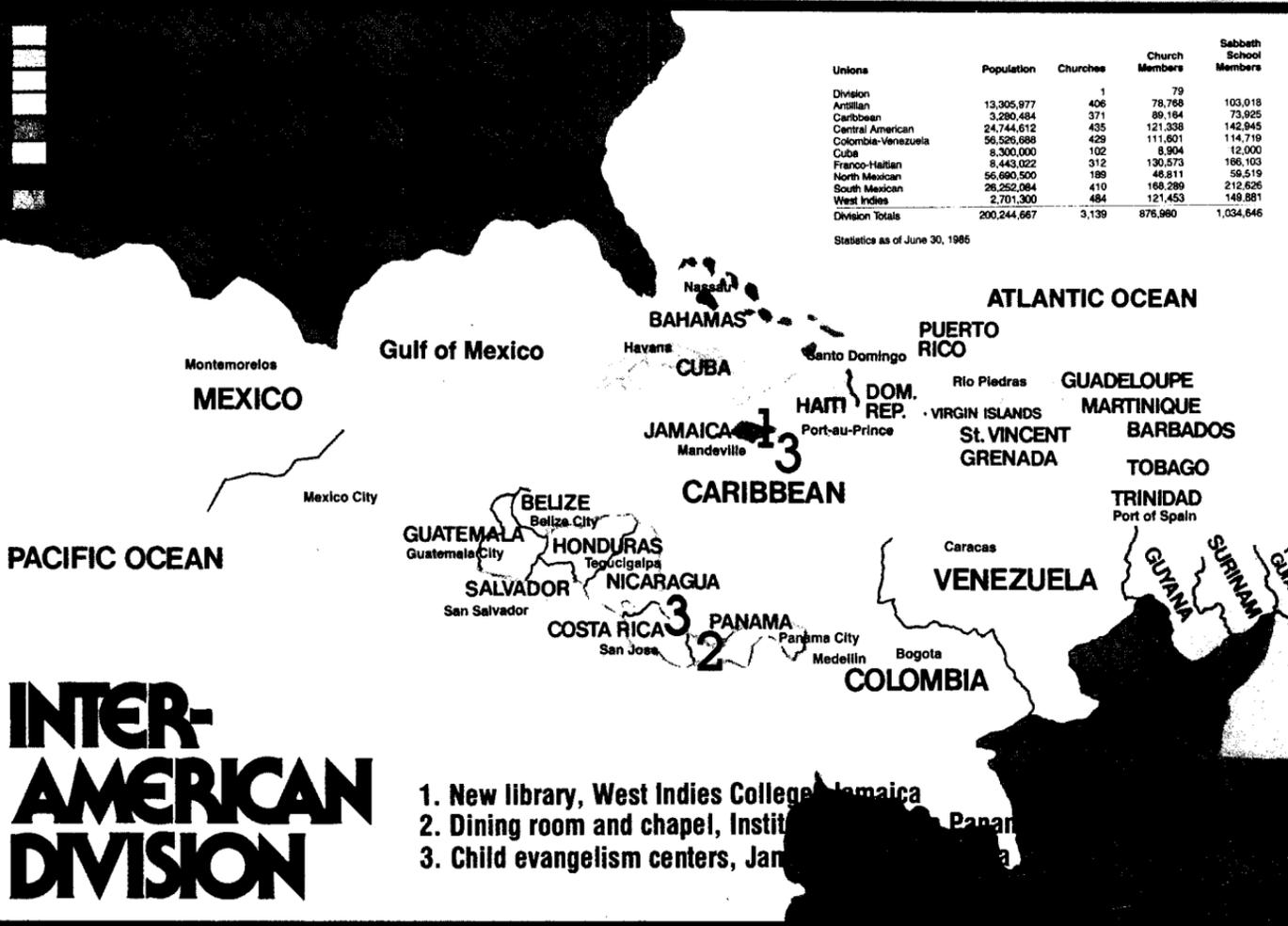
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Unions	Population	Churches	Church Members	Sabbath School Members
Division		1	79	
Antillian	13,305,977	406	78,768	103,018
Caribbean	3,280,484	371	89,194	73,825
Central American	24,744,612	435	121,338	142,945
Colombia-Venezuela	56,526,688	429	111,601	114,719
Cuba	8,300,000	102	8,904	12,000
Franco-Haitian	8,443,022	312	130,573	166,103
North Mexican	56,690,500	189	46,911	59,519
South Mexican	26,252,084	410	169,286	212,626
West Indies	2,701,300	484	121,453	149,881
Division Totals	200,244,667	3,139	876,960	1,034,646

Statistics as of June 30, 1985



INTER-AMERICAN DIVISION

1. New library, West Indies College, Jamaica
2. Dining room and chapel, Instituto Tecnológico de Panamá
3. Child evangelism centers, Jamaica