

A Bible Adventure

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The Story of Esther

A retelling of Esther 1–9

- Part 1 - The Making of a Queen

About 2,500 years ago, in the city of Shushan, the capital of Medo-Persia, there lived a very pretty and caring young woman. Her name was Hadassah.

Hadassah's parents had died when she was a child. Fortunately, she had a cousin named Mordecai, who held a well-paid position as an official at the royal palace in Shushan. When Hadassah's parents died, he adopted her as his own daughter, giving her the Persian name "Esther," meaning "star."

Mordecai was one of the many Jews who had chosen to stay in Medo-Persia rather than go back

to Jerusalem. Ever since the days when King Cyrus ruled Persia, the Jews had been permitted to return to their land. Some 45,000 Jews had chosen to do so with Zerubbabel as their governor, yet hundreds of thousands remained behind. King Cyrus had been kind to the Jews, allowing them to work and worship God as they pleased, which made it easier to stay than return.¹ During the reign of King Ahasuerus, the good relations continued.

Some, like Mordecai, found good employment in the palace, and others became involved in various kinds of business throughout the country. As an official in the palace court, Mordecai, along with other royal servants, sat in the king's gate, near the palace entrance, where

he awaited assignments passed down from the king.

One evening, Mordecai arrived home and brought startling news that Queen Vashti had been banished and the palace was in an uproar. The night before had been the grand conclusion of a seven-day feast that King Ahasuerus had held for hundreds of the chief nobles and governors from the 127 provinces of the realm. The attendees had been drinking and enjoying the spectacular entertainment, and the king, merry with wine, had summoned the queen to appear wearing only her royal crown and to display her beauty before him and his rowdy guests. But Queen Vashti refused.

King Ahasuerus was furious that his order had been defied. He immediately conferred with his most trusted advisors, and it became irrevocably decreed in all provinces that Vashti would never again enter the presence of the king. Her place was to be given to another.

The people of Persia were buzzing with excitement—the king had decided to seek a new queen! Beauty contests were organized in every province, and the loveliest maiden from each would be brought to the royal palace at Shushan for the king's inspection. From India to Ethiopia, beautiful young girls began to arrive at the Royal House of Women, where they would undergo months of special preparation and beauty treatment.

¹ Eighty years later, a second wave returned with the prophet Ezra, and a third wave returned with Nehemiah to work on rebuilding Jerusalem.

My lovely young Esther is more beautiful and worthy than them all, Mordecai mused as he observed each new arrival. *Surely, God would want her to be queen.*

The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that it was Esther's destiny to be a Jewish queen in the house of King Ahasuerus. That night, when he arrived home, Mordecai took Esther aside and told her his revelation. At first, Esther was amused, and then shocked, as she realized his seriousness.

"Who, me?" she said with a laugh. "Why, Father, surely the king would never choose a Jewish girl to be his queen!"

But Mordecai was so sure of the idea that Esther agreed to go with him to the palace.

When they arrived, he introduced her to Hegai, the king's most trusted keeper of the women, who was so struck by Esther's beauty that he felt sure she would

be chosen to be queen. He immediately assigned seven palace maids to care for her, and he gave her the best rooms in the House of the Women.

"Tell no one of your nationality or family background," Mordecai whispered to Esther as he hugged her goodbye. "We mustn't allow anything to spoil your chances of becoming queen."

As the weeks passed, Esther looked more beautiful than ever, but many beautiful women were present who dreamed of nothing else than becoming queen. For her to be chosen above so many would be a miracle.

As for poor Mordecai, he impatiently awaited news of his precious adopted daughter. He was certain that the king would choose her. But suppose he didn't, what would happen to her? Would he allow her to return

home? Many women who had been introduced to the king were chosen to be his concubines, married to the king, yet only to be called into his presence if and whenever he was pleased to summon her by name. In fact, this would be true of the queen as well, since she would live in her own separate house and would only visit the king at his request.

Each young lady underwent twelve months of purification before she would be allowed to meet the king. It was a long wait, yet Esther used this time to prepare her heart for whatever lay ahead. When the day finally arrived for Esther to meet the king, Hegai asked her what she desired to take with her. Before meeting the king, each girl was allowed to take whatever gift she desired from the House of the Women. Although Esther could have asked for anything, as did many of the other girls, she requested nothing but what Hegai recommended.

Outside, Mordecai was waiting to catch a glimpse of Esther as she walked from the women's house to the royal throne room. The onlookers in the corridors gasped in wonder when she appeared. Many lovely young women had passed that way before her, but Esther was different. A unique loveliness radiated from within her.

After King Ahasuerus saw her, he favored her above all the other women, and he set the royal crown on her head and made her his queen.

As Esther stood beside the king, her mind rushed back through her life as a young girl.

How God has kept and protected me all these years, she thought. Even when I had no parents and felt all alone, and things looked ever so dark, still God had a plan for me. If He could help me then, surely He will help me now, when I need Him most.

- Part 2 - “If I Perish, I Perish”

Esther's coronation was cause for a great celebration. No longer was the kingdom without a queen. Happier than ever, King Ahasuerus gave a magnificent banquet for all his princes and officials in Esther's honor. As a gesture of the king's generosity to the people, a special tax holiday was proclaimed throughout all the provinces, and the king distributed gifts with royal liberality.

Not long after young Esther's coronation, two of the king's servants who guarded the palace door, Bigthan and Teresh, were angry at the king and conspired to assassinate him.

Mordecai, Esther's cousin who sat in the king's gate, overheard their treasonable whispers and immediately informed Esther, who reported it to the king and

credited Mordecai for their exposure. After an official investigation confirmed their intentions, the would-be assassins were arrested and hanged. But in all the excitement, Mordecai was forgotten. He received no recognition for saving the king's life.

About this same time, King Ahasuerus chose to install a proud and self-aggrandizing man named Haman the Agagite as his prime minister. Because Haman's new position was higher than that of the other officials, King Ahasuerus had decreed that whenever he passed through the king's gate, everyone present was obliged to bow. Being Jewish and a believer in God, Mordecai could not bring himself to bow to any man, even if it was required by law. He also knew that in spite of Haman's elevated position, the man was proud and ruthless. Whenever he saw Haman passing, Mordecai

would remain standing and would look the other way. This continued until some of the king's officials came to talk with him.

“Why do you transgress the king's commandment?” they asked. “Everyone must bow to Haman, and you are no exception!”

“I am a Jew,” said Mordecai. “I bow only to my God.”

Day after day, they tried to convince Mordecai to yield, but when they saw that he wouldn't be persuaded, they reported the situation to Haman. When he learned that Mordecai had blatantly refused to obey the decree, and that above all, he was a Jew, Haman began to formulate his chance to avenge himself on Mordecai by wiping all the Jews off the face of the earth.

To ensure his plot would succeed, Haman had the priests of the heathen gods cast

lots to find, according to their superstition, the best time to purge the Jews from the Persian Empire. The priests told him that the ideal time would be the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which was the month Adar (March 13 according to our calendar today).

Next, Haman outlined his scheme to King Ahasuerus.

“A certain race of people are dispersed through all the provinces of your kingdom,” Haman told the king, subtly avoiding specific mention of the Jews, “whose laws are different from those of any other nation, and they do not obey the king's laws! Therefore, it is not in the king's interest to put up with them. If it pleases you, O king, let a decree be issued that they be destroyed.”

Haman continued, offering to pay the expenses himself, saying he would pay 10,000 talents of silver to those in charge of the king's business.

Having great confidence in his prime minister, the king took his signet ring and gave it to Haman. “The silver is given to you,” he said. “And these people also, to do with as you please.”

Haman was delighted. His scheme was going better than he had dared to hope. Calling the king’s scribes, he had them prepare the decree in the name of King Ahasuerus. Haman sealed it with the king’s signet ring, and then he had it sent to the governors of the 127 provinces. The order was to destroy, to kill, to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old—children and women included—in one day, March 13, and to take possession of all their goods and lands.

After the decree was sent out, Haman and the king sat down to drink a toast, bidding good riddance to the enemies of the empire.

When Mordecai heard the king’s decree, he tore off his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the middle of the city, crying loudly and bitterly. Similar scenes of sorrow could be witnessed throughout Medo-Persia wherever the decree was read. In every village, there was great mourning, fasting, and weeping among the Jews, and many lay in sackcloth and ashes. Even the Persian citizens of Shushan were perplexed by this sudden strange and alarming decree.

When Esther’s maidens and chamberlains told her how upset Mordecai was, she was very grieved. Not knowing the cause, she sent them to take the sackcloth from him and give him new clothes, but he would not accept them.

“Something must be wrong,” she told Hathach,

one of her chamberlains. “You must go to him and see what is the matter.”

Mordecai told Hathach of all that had happened and of the sum of money that Haman had promised to pay to the king’s treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai then gave Hathach a copy of the official decree to show to Esther.

Along with these facts, Mordecai charged Esther to make supplication to the king for her people, but Esther sent back word that she couldn’t possibly do that.

“Everyone knows that no one, not even the queen herself, is allowed to come into the king’s inner court unless specially invited,” she told him. “It is a law, and the penalty for disobeying it would be death. The only exception is for the king to extend the golden scepter

and to spare that person’s life. And I have not been called to come to the king for thirty days.”

“Do not suppose that just because you live in the king’s palace that you alone will escape,” Mordecai sent back in answer to Esther. “If you keep silent at this time, deliverance will surely come from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows but that you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

It dawned on Esther then why she, a mere orphan girl, had been made queen. All along, the events had been part of God’s plan. He had known that this crisis was coming and had made Esther queen so that she could help to save His people. Indeed, she had come to the kingdom for such a time as this.

Once again, she sent her servant Hathach to Mordecai with an urgent reply, saying, “Gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan and fast for me. Neither eat nor drink for three days and nights. My maidens and I will do the same. Then I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish!”

So Mordecai went his way and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

- Part 3 -

Queen Esther's Courageous Stand

As the day arrived for Queen Esther to go to King Ahasuerus, she wondered what she should say to change his mind about the order to destroy the Jewish people. She knew that Persian kings never altered their decrees. It just wasn't done. Suddenly an idea came to her.

She instructed her maids to prepare a banquet in her house, and then, donning her royal robes, Esther made her way to the king's house.

As she neared the great hall of King Ahasuerus, she felt a surge of confidence, and she stepped serenely to a place where the king could see her and waited. Pleased by the sight of her, King Ahasuerus held out his golden scepter and beckoned her to come forward.

“What is your request, Queen Esther?” the king asked as she reached out to touch the scepter, “I would grant it even up to half of my kingdom.”

“If it pleases the king,” Esther said, “let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared.”

The king immediately sent a messenger telling Haman

to do as the queen had requested.

That evening, the king and his prime minister attended the banquet that Esther had prepared. Then, at the banquet of wine, the king asked her once again what her petition was and promised to grant it even to half of the kingdom.

“My petition and my request is this,” Esther replied. “If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them tomorrow, and then I will answer the king's question.”

The king agreed, his curiosity most surely aroused. Clearly, Esther had something important on her mind. But it was late, and the king was tired, so it could wait until tomorrow.

As for Haman, he was overjoyed. That is, until he passed the gate and saw Mordecai, who neither bowed nor showed any respect for his presence. Haman was filled with rage. Nevertheless, he restrained himself and hurried home to tell his wife Zeresh and closest friends of all the wealth and the many favors and promotions the king had bestowed upon him.

“On top of all this,” he added jubilantly, “Esther the queen invited no other man to come with the king to her banquet but me. And tomorrow I am invited to dine with her again, also with the king.

“But,” he said, his tone becoming sad and bitter, “all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.”

At this remark, Zeresh and his friends suggested that a seventy-five-foot gallows be constructed, and that tomorrow Haman should ask the king for Mordecai to be hanged on it.

“Then you can go in merrily with the king to the banquet!” they said.

Their suggestion pleased Haman, and he commissioned the gallows to be built.

That same night, King Ahasuerus could not sleep, so he commanded that the chronicles of his reign should be read to him. In it was the record of how Mordecai had discovered Bigthan and Teresh’s plot to assassinate King Ahasuerus just in time to save the king’s life.

“What honor or recognition has Mordecai received for this?” the king asked.

“Nothing,” his ministering servants answered.

“Who is in the court?” the king suddenly asked.

“Haman,” they replied.

Haman had come into the outward court of the king’s house to ask the king to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him.

“Let him come in,” said the king.

“Tell me,” he asked as Haman entered. “What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor?”

“For the man whom the king delights to honor,” Haman confidently replied, assuming that the king would delight to honor no one other than Haman himself, “let the king’s royal apparel, the horse upon which he rides, and his royal crown

be delivered to one of the king’s most noble princes, who will then array the man whom the king delights to honor. Then that most noble prince should bring him on horseback through the streets of the city, and proclaim, ‘Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!’”

“Make haste then, Haman,” said the king. “Take the apparel and the horse, as you have said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew that sits at the king’s gate. Neglect nothing of all you have spoken.”

Haman was stunned, but he had to obey. He had the king’s robes, the royal crown, and the royal horse prepared as though King Ahasuerus himself were going to use them. He himself had to parade Mordecai through the

streets while proclaiming the blessings of the king.

Afterwards, Mordecai returned to the king’s gate, but Haman rushed to his house with his head covered. There he told Zeresh and all his friends everything that had befallen him.

“Mordecai is a Jew! This does not bode well for you,” his counselors and wife said to Haman upon his return.

While they conferred, the king’s chamberlains came in haste to escort Haman to the banquet that Queen Esther had prepared.

“What is your petition, Queen Esther?” the king inquired again as they later sat at the banquet of wine. “It shall be granted you. And what is your request? It shall be performed, even to the half of the kingdom.”

“If I have found favor in your sight, O king,” Esther replied. “And if it pleases the king, let my life be spared, and that of my people. For I and my people are to be destroyed. If we had been sold for slaves, perhaps I would have said nothing; although the enemy could not countervail the damage that this will do to the king.”

“Who is this enemy?” King Ahasuerus demanded. “And where is he that presumes to do so?”

“The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman,” said Esther, pointing at Haman, who sat stunned and trembling before them.

The king, filled with rage, arose from the banquet of wine and strode into the palace garden. Haman then stood up and pleaded with Queen Esther for his life because he knew that the king was already determining his fate.

When King Ahasuerus

returned from the palace garden, he saw that Haman had flung himself upon the bed on which Esther was reclining.

“Will he also force the queen in front of me in this house?” the king bellowed, and as soon as he had spoken, chamberlains came and covered Haman’s face.

Then Harbonah, one of the chamberlains, inquired about the gallows which Haman had made for Mordecai.

“Hang him on it,” said the king.

And so, they hanged Haman on the gallows and the king’s wrath was pacified.

With the death of Haman, the king took off his ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai, and made him prime minister. On top of that, the king gave all of Haman’s property to Queen Esther, who appointed Mordecai as its guardian.

However, Haman’s death did

not remove the threat to the Jews. The king’s decree still remained and could not be changed. The entire Jewish race—including those who had returned to Jerusalem—could still be put to death.

So, Esther went yet again before the king, and, falling at his feet, tearfully begged him to put away Haman the Agagite’s scheme against the Jews. With his queen and his prime minister both being Jews, King Ahasuerus was in a difficult position. He saw at once that something had to be done, but he was unsure of what to do. He told Esther that she could write her own decree and seal it with his ring and send it out to all provinces, provided that she not reverse the original decree.

Mordecai and Esther discussed the problem and devised the

solution: Mordecai was to draw up a document that granted the Jews the right to assemble and to fight against and destroy any foreign power or province that would rise up to attack any of their people.

When the decree was finished, Mordecai sealed each copy with the king’s signet ring and couriers rushed the dispatches to each of the provinces from India to Ethiopia. In every land where the decree arrived, there was gladness and a feast for the Jews.

When the thirteenth day of March finally arrived, the Jews not only defended themselves, but they valiantly defeated over seventy thousand of their enemies throughout the Persian Empire.

See “Heroes of the Bible: Queen Esther” for more on this fascinating Bible character.