

The Story of Esther

Background on Esther. Esther was a Jewish woman living in Persia. She was a descendant of Jews who had been carried away into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. The issue in Esther is how Jews can survive as a community under a foreign King and empire.

Esther is one of the great 'diaspora' stories of the Bible. That is, it's about the life of the Jewish people scattered among non-Jewish nations. Esther was a descendant of Jews. Both of Esther's parents died when she was only a child. She was then raised by her cousin, Mordecai, a very good and godly man. He loved and cared for Esther and raised her as he would his own daughter. She grew to be a beautiful woman, both inside and out.

She was so physically beautiful, in fact, that when the King of Persia searched the land for a wife no one was found to be more fair or desirable than Esther. So, she was selected to be the Queen, though no one in the King's palace suspected that she was a Jew. Mordecai had warned her to keep her nationality a secret.

Then an evil man named Haman appeared on the scene, gaining the King's confidence. He had such a high position in the government that the King had commanded all of the royal officials to bow down to Haman wherever he travelled. Everyone did - except Mordecai. Mordecai would bow down only to God.

This infuriated Haman and insulted his pride which led him to devise a plot to not only kill Mordecai, but to wipe out the entire Jewish race. We have seen this before in history. This idea of genocide. The intentional destruction of an entire group or race of people.

Here's what he did: He started a campaign to deceive the King into believing all kinds of horrible things about the Jews who were living in his kingdom. He convinced them that the Jews were subversive, undermining, revolutionary, blaming all types of crime on them. Once he had the King worked up, he convinced him to sign an edict which would reward anyone who killed a Jew with large amounts of money.

Haman knew that if people would be financially rewarded for killing a Jewish person it wouldn't be long before all of the Jews would be hunted down and killed. However, there are always people who resist, who stand up to the abuse of power. This is one of those stories.

An Opportunity

Chapter 4: 1-8

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. ²But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. ³In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

⁴When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. ⁵Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

⁶So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. ⁷Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

Mordecai on hearing this terrible news about the fate of the Jews reacts by putting on sack cloth and ashes as was the custom when someone was experiencing grief. He goes out into the city wailing loudly and bitterly. When the news reached the other areas where Jews lived- they reacted pretty much the same way.

So, Esther wants to know why Mordecai is in such a state. He asks her to go to the King and beg for mercy and plead for the Jews. Mordecai was challenging Esther. God has placed her in a unique role. Now is the time you can make a difference for our people.

Counting the cost

Well, Esther's big moment had come. Now was the time for her to stand up and prevent the annihilation of the Jewish people. However, there was a little rule back in her day. Nobody could just go and see the King. You had to be invited by the King. If you just showed up unannounced, it was considered such an insult that you would be put to death. So Mordecai was asking Esther to risk her life.

Esther 4:9-11

⁹Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, ¹¹"All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold sceptre to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

Esther reminds Mordecai that the King has not called for her in over a month. She has no way of knowing where she stands with the King. There is a lot at risk for Esther. This brings us to Esther's moment. Her decision would go on to shape her life and inspire people for thousands of years.

Sometimes we wonder why sacrifice at all. Nobody notices the daily sacrifices we make as a follower of Jesus Christ. Well, God notices. **Hebrews 6.10 says: “God is not unjust. He will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you helped his people and continue to help them”.** When we sacrifice to help others we are demonstrating our love to God.

The Challenge

Esther 4:12-14

¹² When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, ¹³ he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴ For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

So, Esther is given her moment. Mordecai gets straight to the point. This is a time of absolute crisis. History would come about one way or another. If Esther chooses to do nothing, God will find someone else. The cost will be that she and her family may perish if she fails to act.

So Esther responds in Esther 4: 16, ¹⁶ “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

So, Esther went to the King expecting to lose her life. When the King found out what was going on he had Haman killed. Then he took Mordecai and put him in a place of honour. As a result, the Jews were saved and they continued on until they produced a man named Jesus who would be the saviour of the world.

I know that worry can affect how we make decisions. This what Jesus said about worry. Matthew 6:25-34 ²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life ²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these.

³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying,

‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Sometimes we say to ourselves if only my circumstances were different, then I could do great things for God. Maybe a better question to ask is; what is God seeking to do in my life through my current circumstances? What sacrifice are you willing to make? What sacrifice does God want you to make?

Scholars Note: Why does the book of Esther not mention God? God may not have been mentioned by name but there are numerous indications of him throughout the book. There is the mention of fasting which alludes to an Israelite way of worship. Further, we can see God act throughout a number of coincidences; the timely vacancy of queenship at the Persian court, the accession of a Jew to become queen, Mordecai’s discovery of a plot to kill the Jews, Esther’s favourable reception from the King. These and others are not coincidences but comforting signs of divine control. Haman’s defeat is evidence of God’s providence. Finally, “traditional readers never doubted that it was God guaranteeing Israel’s existence and shaping salvation in Esther’s time as always”.¹

¹ Fox, Michael, *The Religion of the Book of Esther*, Judaism, 39:2 (1990: Spring), 137.