

“Women of the Bible: Esther”

“Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

Esther 4:12-16 ¹

It is late on New Year’s Eve. The festivities are ended, and I am alone in my chambers. In spite of all the celebration, though, my heart is heavy, for this is the first New Year’s Eve in many years that I have been alone.

Xerxes, my husband, has been treacherously murdered by Artabanus, whom he trusted as his Captain of the Guard, and the traitor has given the throne to Artaxerxes, son of Vashti, who was queen before me, making him the sixth Shah of the Great Empire of Persia.² Because my own life may well be forfeit now that Vashti has recovered her influence over the throne, I am recording the story you are about to read in order that the truth may be told about some key events during my husband’s reign.

The story actually begins long before I was born. My given name is Hadassah, daughter of Abihail. My family is from Israel’s tribe of Benjamin, and we are actually descendants of King Saul. My great-grandparents were among those Jews whom Nebuchadnezzar deported from Jerusalem to Babylon in the year 587, and two grandsons were born to them in Babylon—my father and my Uncle Jair.

When the Persians conquered the Babylonians in 539, many of the Jews in Babylon were moved to Susa, one of the Persian capitals. My father and Uncle Jair both had families of their own, and Uncle Jair and Aunt Leah—both much older than my parents—eventually died. Later, my parents also died in a great plague, after which my cousin Mordecai took me into his home as one of his own children.

Once the Babylonians had been conquered, Greece became the greatest rival to the Persian Empire. Xerxes’ father, Darius, had many battles with the Greeks, as

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 14, 2016.

² Xerxes I reigned from 486-465 B.C. Esther became queen in 479 B.C.

did Xerxes himself. In 481, Xerxes threw a great banquet which actually served as a war council to plan his next campaign against the Greeks.

At one point during the banquet, Xerxes called for his queen, Vashti (also known as Amestris), to parade her beauty before his drunken guests. When Vashti refused to be so treated, Xerxes consulted his advisers and then deposed her for her insolence. Shortly thereafter, Xerxes took his army on a great campaign against the Greeks, defeating them in the Battle of Thermopylae in August of 480, and then being defeated by them at Salamis in September, after which he returned to Susa.

While Xerxes was away on this campaign, a great many changes came into my life. Hundreds of the most beautiful young women in the Empire were rounded up and brought to the fortress of Susa, where we were prepared to go to the king as candidates to become queen after Vashti.

When I was taken to the king's harem, Mordecai told me to conceal the fact that I was a Jew, and he gave me a Persian name, Esther, to help with this concealment. The harem was under the management of a eunuch named Hegai, and I soon became his favorite among the many candidates for queen. Because he liked me, Hegai treated me especially kindly and ordered a special diet and beauty treatments for me. He also assigned seven maids to care for me and moved us into the best place in the harem. Mordecai worked in the fortress, and he came by the courtyard of the harem every day to check on me.

As I've mentioned, all of the women in the first harem, where I was, were being prepared for our one night with the king, after which we would become one of the king's concubines and be moved to the second harem, where we would live for the rest of our lives, probably never seeing the king again. One of us, though, was going to be chosen as queen!

My time to go to the king came after the wars, in the early winter of the seventh year of his reign (479 B.C.). Because Hegai had told me how to win the king's favor, the king loved me more than any of the other young women. Xerxes

was so delighted with me that he set the royal crown on my head at once and declared me queen instead of Vashti. Oh, how my life changed then!

One day as Mordecai was on duty at the palace, two of the king's eunuchs, Bigthana and Teresh—who were guards at the doors of the king's private quarters—became angry at Xerxes and plotted to assassinate him. Mordecai somehow got wind of the plot and sent word to me about it. I told the king about the danger, giving Mordecai credit for discovering it. When Mordecai's story proved true, Bigthana and Teresh were executed, and all of this was recorded in *The Book of the History of King Xerxes' Reign*. That became quite important later.

Several years passed, and King Xerxes promoted Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite to the position of prime minister, making him the most powerful official in the Empire after the king himself. The Agagites were descendants of the Amalekites, who were ancient enemies of my people. Seven hundred years before, the God of Israel had told my ancestor, King Saul, to annihilate the Amalekites because of their great wickedness, but Saul had failed to do this, though he did kill most of them.³ Some of the remaining Amalekites had been deported to Babylon with my ancestors, and this Haman was one of their descendants.

Because Mordecai knew Haman's ancestry, he refused to bow down before Haman as all the king's officials were supposed to do. Haman was very vain, and this refusal made him furious. When Haman discovered that Mordecai was a Jew, this centuries-old hatred formed itself into plans for genocide as Haman began to plot the execution of every Jew in the Empire.

In April of the year 474, Haman cast lots, called *purim*, to determine the best time to kill the Jews. The day selected was March 7, 473. Haman approached the king and asked for permission to exterminate the people called the Jews, promising to pay a large portion of the plunder to be taken from them into the royal treasury. Because human life is unfortunately cheap these days, Xerxes agreed to his prime

³ Exodus 17:14-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19; 1 Samuel 15.

minister's request, giving Haman his royal signet ring to use in issuing an edict for the destruction of my people.

When Mordecai learned of this edict, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and stood at the gate of the palace weeping and wailing. Word came to me of Mordecai's strange behavior, and I sent my personal eunuch, Hathach, out with clean clothing for him, but he refused to wear it, sending a copy of the decree back to me.

Mordecai also asked me to go to the king to plead for the lives of our people. I sent Hathach back out to Mordecai with this message: "The whole world knows that anyone who appears before the king in his inner court without being invited is doomed to die unless the king holds out his gold scepter. And the king hasn't called for me to come to him in more than a month" (Esther 4:11).

Hathach returned with this reply from Mordecai: "My dear one, don't think for a moment that you will escape there in the palace when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. What's more, who can say but that you have been elevated to the palace for just such a time as this?" (Esther 4:13-14).

I thought about this for a while and then, with a shaky hand, I wrote my answer: "Go then and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I am willing to die, if it may save our people" (Esther 4:15-16).

And so, three days later, I gathered my courage, put on one of Xerxes' favorite dresses, and entered the inner court of the palace, unbidden. When the king saw me, he smiled and held out his scepter to welcome me. "What do you want, my Queen?" he asked. "I will give it to you, even if it is half the kingdom!"

I replied, "If it please Your Majesty, let the king and Haman come today to a banquet I have prepared for the king." So Xerxes sent for Haman, and they came to dinner.

As we were eating, the king asked me again, "Now, my dear, tell me what you really want. What is your request? I will give it to you, even if it is half the kingdom!"

And I replied, "If Your Majesty is pleased with me and wants to grant my request, please come with Haman tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for you. Then tomorrow I will explain what this is all about."

Haman was very pleased with this special treatment, but when he left the banquet and saw Mordecai at the gate, rendering no honor to him, he was furious, and he went home in a great pout. When Haman's wife, Zeresh, heard about all this, she said, "Well, why don't you have a huge gallows built in the courtyard and go to the king early in the morning asking for Mordecai to be hung on it. Then you can go and enjoy your lunch." Haman was very pleased with this idea, and he ordered the gallows to be built.

Xerxes didn't sleep well that night, and he called for the historical records of his reign to be read to him so that he would be bored and go to sleep. And out of twelve years of records, God caused the one to be chosen that recorded Mordecai's rescuing the king from Bigthana and Teresh.

"What did we do for Mordecai to thank him for this?" the king asked, and his attendants replied, "Nothing has been done."

When Haman arrived early the next morning to ask for Mordecai's execution, the king asked him, "What should I do to honor a man who truly pleases me?"

Of course, Haman thought the king intended to honor him, so he said, "If the king wishes to honor someone, he should bring out one of the king's own royal robes, as well as the king's own horse, and instruct one of the king's most noble

princes to dress this man in the king's robe and lead him through the streets shouting, 'This is what happens to those the king wishes to honor!'"

"That's excellent!" the king said to Haman. "Hurry and get my robe and my horse and do just as you have said for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the gate of the palace. Carry out everything you have suggested!" Haman did as he was told, of course, and then went home, completely humiliated.

When Haman and the king came to my second banquet, the king was bursting with curiosity to find out what it was that I wanted, so I took a deep breath and replied, "If Your Majesty is pleased with me and wants to grant my request, my petition is that my life and the lives of my people will be spared. For my people and I have been sold to those who would kill, slaughter, and annihilate us."

"Who would do such a thing?" King Xerxes demanded. "Who would dare to touch you?"

And I answered, "This wicked Haman is our enemy." Haman grew pale with terror, because the fact that I was a Jew had been concealed from him as well. The king jumped to his feet and stormed out into the palace garden in a rage.

Haman grabbed me to plead for his life just as the king returned, and Xerxes shouted, "Will he even assault the queen right here in the palace, before my very eyes?!?"

Understanding the situation, Harbona, another of the king's eunuchs, said, "Haman has set up a gallows that stands seventy-five feet tall in his own courtyard. He intended to use it to hang Mordecai, the man who saved the king from assassination."

"Then hang Haman himself on it, and give all his property to the Queen!" the king ordered.

After that was accomplished, and when Xerxes finally calmed down, I

revealed to him that Mordecai was my cousin, but that he was really more like my father. The king then took off his signet ring, which he had taken back from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai, making him prime minister in Haman's place; and I appointed Mordecai to manage the property that had been Haman's.

On June 25, the king authorized Mordecai to promulgate a new decree, giving the Jews the right to defend themselves against their enemies. As this decree made its way through the Empire, many people decided to become Jews (small wonder!), and on March 7 of the year 473, the very day on which Haman had intended to destroy us, our people destroyed their enemies and our fear and mourning were turned into joy. Even now, years later, my people still celebrate the Feast of Purim to give thanks for God's deliverance!

So what does all this mean to you, my reader? Since I don't know who you are, I cannot say for sure. But since it is surely no accident that you have come into possession of this record, there are several things I want you to remember.

In the first place, you need to realize that **when God tells you to do something, you would do well to do it**, whether you understand it or not. Had Saul done this 700 years ago, the sad story I have just told would not have happened at all. Trust Him.

Second, **human disobedience does not prevent God from attaining His purposes**. God is well able to bring good out of evil, if we are willing to obey Him. Trust Him.

Third, remember that **God is always at work in your life**, and that some of the things that don't make sense in your life at the moment—like my being forced into the king's harem—just might be God's way of preparing you for opportunities that you can't even imagine today. Trust Him.

Finally, if you find yourself in a place of privilege, remember that **privilege is not simply to be enjoyed, but to be used for God's purposes**. As Mordecai reminded

me, "God will accomplish His purpose with or without you, but who can say but that you have been elevated to the palace for just such a time as this?"

Dear Reader, you will not see many miracles if you choose safety over obedience. I encourage you, therefore, to trust God, to obey God, and to make the most of this day. As a poet has written:

Look to this day,
For it is life, the very life of life.
In its brief course lie all the verities and realities of your existence;
the bliss of growth, the glory of action, the splendor of beauty.

For yesterday is but a dream
And tomorrow is only a vision,
But today well lived makes
every yesterday a dream of happiness
and every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well, therefore to this day!⁴

⁴ "Salutation to the Dawn," by Hindu playwright Kalidasa, c. 400 B.C.