

Esther

HER NAME MAY DERIVE FROM
“Ishtar,” the Babylonian Goddess of Love,
or from the Persian Word for “Star”
Her Hebrew Name, “Hadassah,” Means “Myrtle”

HER CHARACTER: An orphan in a foreign land, she was willing to conceal her Jewish identity in a bid for a pagan king’s affection. Esther seemed willing to make moral compromises by sleeping with the king and then taking part in a wedding that would necessarily have required her to pay homage to foreign gods. Even so, she displayed great courage in the midst of a crisis. Prior to risking her life for her people, she humbled herself by fasting and then put her considerable beauty, social grace, and wisdom in the service of God’s plan.

HER SORROW: To learn that her husband, the king, had unwittingly placed her life and the life of her people in jeopardy.

HER JOY: To watch mourning turn to celebration once the Jews enjoyed relief from their enemies.

KEY SCRIPTURE: Esther 1–10

Monday

HER STORY

*V*ashti, queen of Persia, was the most powerful woman in the Middle East, yet her power was as fragile as a candle in a storm. Her husband, Xerxes, had just summoned her to appear before a festive gathering of his nobles. Vashti, however, having no intention of parading herself like a prized cow in front of a herd of drunken men, refused.

What should be done to punish her insolence? One of the king's counselors spoke for all: "Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, 'King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.' There will be no end of disrespect and discord."

So poor Vashti bore the brunt of every man's fears. She who had refused the royal summons was forever banished from the royal presence, and a great domestic uprising was squelched before it even began.

After a while, a search was conducted for a new queen to replace Vashti. It so happened that many Jews were living in Persia at the time. Exiled from Judah a hundred years earlier (after Jerusalem's fall in 587 BC), they had been deported to Babylon, which in turn was conquered by Persia. Mordecai and his orphaned cousin Esther were among those living in exile, 650 miles northeast of Jerusalem.

Like many other young virgins, the beautiful Esther was gathered into the king's harem. To refuse the privilege may well have meant her death. Counseled by Mordecai to keep her Jewish origins a secret, because being a Jew would probably have disqualified her from becoming queen, she spent the next twelve months awaiting her tryst with the king. When the moment came, Esther so pleased Xerxes that she became queen in Vashti's place.

Some time later, an Amalekite named Haman rose to power in Persia. Haman was so highly placed that other officials knelt before him as a sign of respect. One man, however, the Jew Mordecai, refused to kneel. Haman became so angry that he decided to eliminate every Jew in the kingdom.

To ascertain the most favorable moment for destroying them, Haman piously consulted his gods by casting lots (or *pur*). A date eleven months into the future was revealed—March 7 by our reckoning. Haman immediately persuaded Xerxes to issue a decree that all the Jews in his realm were to be slaughtered on that day. By way of incentive, the decree proclaimed that anyone who killed a Jew could plunder his possessions.

Mordecai reacted immediately by contacting his cousin Esther and asking her to beg Xerxes for mercy. But Esther was afraid and replied, "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 scepter to them and spare their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

Mordecai replied, "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 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 royal position for such a time as this?"

So Esther instructed Mordecai, "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 maids 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."

On the third day, Esther approached the king. As soon as Xerxes saw her, he held out the golden scepter. "What is it, Queen Esther?" he asked. "What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given to you."

But Esther merely invited the king and Haman to join her that evening for a banquet she had prepared especially for them. That evening the king again pressed her to ask for whatever she desired, but Esther simply invited the king and Haman to another banquet, to be held the following night.

That evening, on his way home, Haman caught sight of Mordecai, sitting smugly rather than kneeling as he passed by. Haman was outraged, but his wife consoled him by proposing an evil scheme—he need merely build a gallows and then ask the king to hang Mordecai on it the next morning.

While Haman was happily constructing a gallows for his enemy, the king was pacing the royal bedroom. Unable to sleep, he ordered one of his servants to read from the annals of the kingdom. That evening's reading just happened to be about how Mordecai had once saved the king's life by warning of a plot against him. It struck

the king that Mordecai had never been properly rewarded for his loyalty.

So the next morning the king asked Haman: "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?"

Assuming the king intended to reward him in some new and marvelous way, the foolish Haman replied with a grandiose suggestion: "For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden. Then let one of the king's most noble princes robe the man and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'"

"Go at once," the king commanded him. "Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew."

Haman was dumbstruck. The man who had planned to bury his enemy was suddenly forced to exalt him that very day!

That night, as the king and Haman were once again drinking wine at the queen's banquet, the king implored Esther to ask for whatever her heart desired. This time she spoke her mind: "If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation."

"Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?" the king demanded.

"The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman."

And so Haman's star, which had risen to so great a height, fell suddenly, like a bolt of lightning crashing from the sky. He was hanged on the very same gallows he had built for the Jew Mordecai, and all his property was given to Esther. Furthermore, the king, because he could not revoke one of his own edicts, issued another to counteract the first one. It gave Jews throughout the empire the right to protect themselves, to destroy and plunder every enemy who might raise a hand against them on the seventh of March.

As news of the king's edict spread, many people from various nationalities became so terrified that they claimed to be Jews themselves. The very day Haman's gods had revealed as a day of reckoning for the Jews became a day of reckoning for their enemies. Ever

after, the Jews commemorated these events with the Feast of Purim. As the book of Esther says, these days were celebrated “as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration.”

Subject to foreign powers after the exile, God’s people must have felt among the weakest elements of society. But weaker even than a Jewish man exiled to a foreign land was a Jewish woman. And weakest of all would have been a young orphan of Jewish descent. God had once again employed one of his favorite methods for accomplishing his purposes: He had raised an imperfect woman, the weakest of the weak, placing her in a position of immense strategic importance.

But it had been up to Esther to decide whether she would play the part God offered. Like Moses, she chose to identify with God’s people even if it meant risking her life to do so. And even though exile was a punishment for Israel’s long unfaithfulness, God showed that he was still with his people, delivering and protecting them in surprising ways, turning the table on their enemies through a series of stunning reversals. Earthly powers were at work to kill and destroy, but a heavenly power, far greater in scope, was at work to save and preserve.

THE FESTIVAL OF PURIM

When Haman threw the lot or the *pur* to discover what day would be the best day to annihilate the Jews in Xerxes' kingdom, he unwittingly established a festival called Purim, when, instead of annihilation, the Jews celebrated their deliverance. Esther and her cousin Mordecai jointly worked to overturn Haman's plot, and when they were successful, they sent out a proclamation to all the Jews living in Xerxes' kingdom to "celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration" (Esther 9:21–22).

Adar 14 and 15. Adar was the last month in the Jewish calendar—our February/March. Josephus, the first-century Jewish general and historian, claimed that Jews all over the world celebrated the festival of Purim in his day, and it continues to be a popular festival for Jews today.

Worship and fasting typically make up the first day of the festival. The entire book of Esther is read aloud, and the congregation responds with "Let his name be blotted out" each time Haman's name is read. The children in the group respond to Haman's name with noisemakers and rattles. On the second day of the feast, rejoicing and celebration break out. Food, music, dramas and plays, special songs, and recitals all add to the festive mood. People give gifts to each other and also make sure they don't forget to give gifts and food to the poor, as that was a special wish of Mordecai (Esther 9:22).

Like the Passover, the Feast of Purim celebrates divine deliverance. Saved from Pharaoh's rule and slavery in Egypt and delivered from the destruction planned by Haman, the Jews celebrated a deliverance that only God could have orchestrated. Previously doomed, they were now delivered. As believers, we too have something to celebrate. Instead of a Moses or an Esther, God sent his own Son to deliver us, saving us from the terrible destruction of sin and death. Surely, that's reason enough to celebrate!

Read Esther 3:12—4:17.

1. By concealing her Jewishness and being willing to become a member of King Xerxes' harem, Esther seemed to be caving in to the pagan culture in which she lived. What do you think of her actions in this regard?
2. From other ancient sources we know that Esther's husband, the king, was legendary for his irrational temper and fits of cruelty. Describe Esther's dilemma. What will happen if she does nothing? What might happen if she does what Mordecai asks?
3. Look at 4:12–14. What do you see in Mordecai's words that might have motivated Esther to take the risk?
4. Why does Esther ask all the city's Jews to fast (4:15–16)?
5. God is never named in the original Hebrew version of this story, nor does the writer mention prayer. Where, if anywhere, do you see God in this story?
6. Esther's position was no accident, and neither is yours. Think about the time and people among whom God has placed you. What might God have for you to do right where you are now?

God often uses the most unlikely characters to fulfill his purposes. He elevates a Jewish orphan to become queen of a great empire. Esther begins as a nobody and becomes a somebody, a woman who somewhat reluctantly risks her life to make a stand.

Again, God reveals his penchant for using the most unlikely, ordinary people to accomplish his divine purposes. But, you may wonder, could God ever use you to accomplish his purposes, with all your foibles and imperfections, your lack of talent or influence? Yes, he can! He isn't looking for people who are perfect or talented or influential. He is only looking for people who are willing.

Promises in Scripture

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

—ESTHER 4:14

For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

—2 CORINTHIANS 8:12

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.

—HEBREWS 12:1–2

HER LEGACY OF PRAYER

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 royal position for such a time as this?

—ESTHER 4:14

- REFLECT ON:** Esther 5–8.
- PRAISE GOD:** That he turns the wisdom and the power of the world on its head, often using the most surprising tactics to accomplish his plan.
- OFFER THANKS:** That God has an important purpose for your life.
- CONFESS:** Any tendency to view your life in isolation from God's people, to shrink back from some step of faith God may be calling you to take.
- ASK GOD:** For the grace to act courageously and wisely.

Lift Your Heart

*M*any Jewish girls celebrate the Feast of Purim by dressing up as Queen Esther. One way we can emulate her today is by fasting. Before Esther took action, she employed a time-honored spiritual discipline to expose her need before God. Fasting was a visible sign of her dependency and weakness, an eloquent form of begging God's help. This week, do a little eloquent begging yourself by choosing a day to fast from breakfast and lunch—dinner, too, if you're brave! Drink only water or fruit juice. Perhaps you have a particular need or problem you would like to surrender to God. Tell God that you need him more than you need food. Don't try to manipulate him by your self-sacrifice, but simply allow your weakness to emerge in his presence.

Lord, I need you so much more than food or water. Without your presence, your protection, your wisdom, your gift of faith, I would be lost. I'm hungry for you alone. Hear my prayer and give me everything I need to do your will. Use me in the church and in the world around me to accomplish your purposes.