

Lessons from Esther

Esther was used to carry out a high-level, specialized mission within the dangerous political heart of the Persian Empire. Her mission involved her in a series of striking contrasts. An orphaned female member of a despised ethnic and religious minority living in the superpower of her day, she became the wife of the Persian king. This was no rags-to-riches fairy tale. Rather, she was lifted from obscurity and groomed to carry out a highly specialized mission. It required of her the risky strategy of working, at first, undercover. Later she had to make a perilous full disclosure of her ethnicity and faith.

Supported by her cousin and foster father Mordecai, her daring witness at the intrigue-ridden court of the Persian Empire saved her people, reversed their low social status, and made them empire-wide objects of admiration.

No doubt as a result of her faithfulness, knowledge of the true God became more widespread among their heathen captors. Though not your typical missionary story, the narrative of Esther and Mordecai does present some interesting principles that can help us to understand what it means to witness in peculiar circumstances.

Esther in Persia

Read Esther 1:2-20. What is happening here? What things about this story are hard to understand from our perspective today? (As you read, remember that a lot of details are not presented.)

The weeklong banquet that King Ahasuerus gave for his nobles and officials seems extravagant, even for someone at the pinnacle of political power, far beyond what most Christians could find acceptable. The unrestricted consumption of alcohol (Esther 1:7-8) was to be expected on such occasions. Such banquets were not unprecedented. Records exist of ancient kings bragging about having entertained thousands of guests on special occasions. Excessive drinking in such circumstances certainly clouded the king's judgment to the point that he ordered his wife Vashti to provide entertainment for the king's drunken, all-male gathering. This was far beneath her dignity as a married woman and as a member of the royal family. Whatever her response, she faced the dilemma of losing status, and her courageous choice to retain self-esteem in the face of an autocratic ruler's base desires prepares the reader to understand the power for good that a principled woman could exert, even in a male-dominated royal court.

Meanwhile, though, we have to deal with the actions of Esther. Esther 2:3 gives the impression that these women were not volunteers. The king issued the decree, and so Esther had to come. Had she refused, who knows the outcome?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. In what ways can we apply the principles seen in these verses to what happened with Esther? Or do they apply?

Esther in the Court of the King

Read Esther 2:10,20. What situations might arise where nationality or religious affiliation should be hidden, at least for a time?

Read John 4:1-26, the story of Jesus and the woman at the well. Why did Jesus tell her so openly that He was the Messiah, when among His own people He was not so

forthcoming? How does this account, perhaps, help us to understand Mordecai's words to Esther?

Twice Mordecai charged Esther not to reveal her nationality and family background. This has troubled some commentators, who have questioned the need for this attitude of concealment, especially during a time that the Jewish people were not threatened. Could she not have been a witness about her God to these pagans if she were open about who she was and the God she worshiped? Or could it be argued that to be a Jew lacked credibility at the Persian court and that revealing her ethnicity would have hindered her in gaining access to the king when she pleaded for her people? However, it appears that even before the threat occurred Mordecai had warned Esther not to reveal her identity. The fact is that the Bible does not tell us the reason for his words to her; however, as we can see with the example of Jesus, one does not have to reveal everything at once in every circumstance. Prudence is a virtue.

Meanwhile, why did Jesus speak so openly to the woman at the well and not to His own people?

Christ was far more reserved when He spoke to them. That which had been withheld from the Jews, and which the disciples were afterward enjoined to keep secret, was revealed to her. Jesus saw that she would make use of her knowledge in bringing others to share His grace. — Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 190.

Have you ever been in a situation in which you deemed it prudent not to say too much about your faith or your beliefs? What reasons did you have? As you look back now, what might you have done differently, if anything?

For Such a Time As This (Esther 2:19-5:8)

In Esther 3:1-5, the plot of the story starts to unfold. Mordecai, a Jew—following the commandment against idolatry—refused to bow down to Haman, a mere man. Furious, Haman sought a way to avenge himself for what he took as a slight. Mordecai, by his actions, in a way was witnessing among these pagans about the true God.

What excuse did Haman use to try to rid the empire of the Jews? What does this tell us about how easy it is to let cultural differences blind us to the humanity of all people? Esther 3:8-13; see also Acts 17:26.

As Haman's plot was made known, Mordecai expressed his grief visibly, using one of the Jewish religious rituals mentioned in the book of Esther: He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, . . . wailing loudly and bitterly (Esther 4:1). In the meantime, Esther prepared to go before the king. She would become a Jewish breaker of royal Persian law by heroically entering the king's presence without invitation, as part of a plan to foil Haman's plot. The king admitted her and accepted her invitation to dine. Esther now takes the lead in the drama faced by the Jewish exiles across all of Persia. In this story, Esther showed self-denial and heroism (Esther 4:16), tact (Esther 5:8), and courage (Esther 7:6).

"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. — Ellen G. White Comments, in The SDA Bible Commentary, vol. 3, p. 1140.

Read Esther 4:14, Mordecai's famous words to Esther:

Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?. In what ways might the principle behind these words apply to you, right now?

Mordecai and Haman

According to Esther 5-8, how was Esther able to save her people?

The accounts of Esther's two banquets bring the story to its crisis point. They also record the great reversal of the plotted ethnic extermination. On the way, the story exposes the difference between true honour and self-honour, and it records the punishment of the villain. These court intrigues had far-reaching consequences. They give us a glimpse into the behind-the-scenes workings of an absolute monarch and his court. Esther and Mordecai used their positions, their knowledge of the culture in which they lived, and their faith in God's covenant promises to His people to bring about their deliverance.

Meanwhile, despite his quiet life of service, Mordecai let his faith be known, if through no other means than his refusal to bow down before Haman. People noticed, and they admonished him, but he refused to compromise his faith (Esther 3:3-5). This, surely, was a witness to others.

Read Esther 6:1-3. What does this tell us about Mordecai? What lessons could we draw about how God's people can function, even witness, in foreign lands?

Though Mordecai obviously was following the Lord, nevertheless he showed allegiance, and loyalty, to the sovereign of the nation in which he lived. While refusing to bow before a man, he still was a good citizen, in that he exposed the plot against the king. Though we can't read too much into the fact that he hadn't been honoured for this act, very possibly he did it and then just went on his way, not expecting any reward. In time, though, as the story shows, his good deed was more than rewarded. His example here is perhaps best expressed by these words: Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's (Matt. 22:21).

When Some Gentiles Became Jews

Read Esther 8. Focus specifically on verse 17. How can we understand this in terms of outreach and witness?

No question, the book of Esther is not a typical story about outreach and witness. And yet we can see something like this scenario happening here toward the end. As a result of the king's edict on behalf of the Jews, many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them (Esther 8:17). Some commentators argue that theirs could not have been a true conversion experience, since fear and anxiety should have no place in proselytizing. While that's true, who knows in the longer run how these people, whatever their motives at first, might have responded to the working of the Holy Spirit, especially after seeing great differences between their beliefs and the belief and worship of the one true God?

Read Romans 1:18-20. How might the concepts taught here come into play with these people, especially in the context of this story?

In the original decrees against the Jews, not only were the Jews to be killed, but the ones to do it were told that they should plunder their possessions (Esther 3:13). Also, when the Jews were given permission to kill their enemies, they too were told that they could plunder the possession of their enemies (Esther 8:11). However, three times in the book of Esther (Esther 9:10,15-16) it specifically says that the Jews did not lay a hand on the plunder. Though the texts don't say why, the fact that it was mentioned three times shows the emphasis that was placed on this act. Most likely they refrained because they wanted it known that they were acting out of self-defence and not greed.

How can we make sure that in our outreach and witness to others we don't do anything that would cause people to question our motives? Why is this so important?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *In the Days of Queen Esther, Prophets and Kings*, pp. 598-606.

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. Today the enemies of the true church see in the little company keeping the Sabbath commandment a Mordecai at the gate. The reverence of God's people for His law is a constant rebuke to those who have cast off the fear of the Lord and are trampling on His Sabbath. — Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 605.