

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Bible Women: Esther - Faithful in Persecution

Esther must have been a very remarkable young lady. She was an orphan, of Jewish parents, living in a foreign land, Persia, at a very vulnerable age. We don't know how old Esther was at the time, but she must have been quite young. To add to her other problems, the Bible account, in the Book bearing her name, tells us that she was particularly beautiful. No doubt many of the young men in the neighbourhood would be hoping to make her acquaintance, get to know her, and develop a personal relationship with her.

Although without immediate family, she did, however, have a cousin, Mordecai. He must have been extremely resourceful, and was so concerned about Esther's welfare that he adopted her as his daughter. Furthermore, even as a despised Jew living in Shushan, the capital of the Persian Empire, he had evidently made a big enough impact so as to make considerable progress in the Persian court circle.

When we join the story, the capital was seething with unrest, indeed, total consternation. The king, Ahasuerus, had arranged a series of feasts, which would eventually last six months in all. This was not uncommon in those days, about five hundred years before Christ was born into the world. It would be a grand opportunity for the king to show off his huge possessions to his influential and impressionable guests.

Unfortunately for him, he had a problem. It was a very big problem. The highlight of the activities, in his mind, was intended to be a special feast in favour of his wife, and queen, Vashti. The earlier days of this extended jamboree were spent with the men and the women having their own separate feasts. The climax was to be a joint event, when Queen Vashti was to preside, jointly with King Ahasuerus, over the final and biggest feast of all. Sad to say, Vashti chose this of all occasions to assert her independence by refusing to join the king. "No", she said, "I'm busy with my friends. I'm not going to drop everything just to be at your beck and call."

In our modern age, it is difficult to imagine the sort of uproar this would cause in those much less liberal and politically-correct days. Even now, for an official state occasion, it would really not be acceptable for the King's consort to decline to attend such a grand function. But refuse she did.

After consultation with his advisers, the king decided to dethrone Vashti. He would then set about replacing her with one more amenable to his wishes. Mind you, I don't suppose there are many women who would decline the opportunity to become the consort of the sovereign of an empire which stretched from India in the east to Ethiopia in the west. Obviously, the selection of the new queen was a rather involved, tortuous and lengthy procedure. I don't suppose it will surprise many who read the preliminary details to learn that Esther, the beautiful young Jewess, was the eventual, final choice. She owed this, at least in part, to the advice she was given by her cousin Mordecai, and the help he provided by some astute lobbying on her behalf. So there she was, newly established queen with, it would seem, a long, happy reign ahead of her. But life isn't like that, is it?

Now, Mordecai's great grandfather had been carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon in the days of Nebuchadnezzar. While Mordecai had effectively sponsored her, there was still a general antipathy against Jews. They were indeed still God's chosen earthly people. At the same time their waywardness and rebellion had made it necessary for God to discipline them by having them conquered by their Gentile enemies and carried away to a distant land. Even generations later, the situation was still delicate. Because of this, Mordecai advised Queen Esther to be discreet about her Jewish background, particularly at first while she settled in to her new role in life.

Even though Esther was now so elevated, she maintained her respect for Mordecai as the one who had brought her up, and given her such wise counsel and advice. Mordecai himself had been earning respect in another direction. He had overheard two court officials plotting to assassinate King Ahasuerus. Mordecai reported this to Queen Esther, who passed on the information to the appropriate authorities. She was faithful, and careful, as she did so, to ensure that a proper record was maintained giving Mordecai the credit for saving the king's life.

I suppose most of us make bad mistakes at one time or another. The big mistake of Ahasuerus was to appoint a wicked man called Haman as his chief adviser. Because of the position the king had given him, and also because of his vindictive nature, nearly everyone was extremely deferential towards Haman. Mordecai was an outstanding

exception. Haman absolutely hated him for it. Not only so, but other officials quizzed Mordecai as to why he ignored Haman. Mordecai pointed out that, as a Jew, it would not have been right for him to defer to Haman in this extravagant way. This aggravated Haman even more. Haman's way of getting his own back was to plot to have all Jews, not just Mordecai, but all Jews, killed throughout the vast kingdom of Ahasuerus. Such was his influence with the king that the latter readily authorised the plan, to be carried out on a specified day. He even gave his seal to Haman to authenticate the legislation. The decree was published abroad.

Obviously, Mordecai was terribly upset at this. In keeping with Jewish custom, he lamented publicly, in sackcloth and ashes. When Queen Esther's maids reported this to her, she sent some proper clothes for Mordecai to wear to come to visit her. Mordecai demurred at this and refused to cease mourning the tragic turn of events. He would not, of course, have been allowed into the palace wearing sackcloth and ashes.

In response to Esther's message of enquiry, Mordecai made this important and oft-quoted reply. "Who knows but that this is the very reason why you've been made Queen?" It isn't stated in the text, but it is a subtle reminder that God is in ultimate control behind the scenes. As a poet so aptly put it: 'God moves behind the scenes And He moves the scenes He is behind'

Esther responded promptly to her cousin's entreaty. "Gather together all the Jews in the capital and begin a fast. My maids and I will do the same. After this, I will seek an interview with the king and try to sort it all out."

Now, this brings a remarkable fact to light. Strikingly, the book of Esther is the only book in the whole of the Bible which does not directly mention the Name of God. At the same time, the reference to gather the people together to fast in view of the important matter that lay ahead is certainly very much a part of the Jewish practice associated with intense, earnest prayer to God in times of great distress. Esther certainly knew the risk she was going to take. Indeed, she was actually taking her life into her very hands. As she said to Mordecai, "If I perish, I perish". This was because only those actually summoned into the king's presence could approach him with impunity. This even applied to the queen of the land.

Happily, when he saw Queen Esther attired in all her royal regalia, Ahasuerus was delighted to see her. He invited her to join him and asked her what she wanted. Esther was very discreet, as the court protocol demanded. She asked him if he, accompanied by the villainous Haman, would join her in a banquet she had arranged for them later that day. "Sure", said the king. "We'll be there." Of course, Haman was delighted to be included in this special mark of favour. When Esther entertained Ahasuerus and Haman, she maintained her discretion as to her real purpose, and merely invited them to another banquet the following day. That was the way things were done in those days. However, on Haman's way home to tell his wife and family of his good fortune, he was reminded of the only fly in his ointment, the only cloud in his otherwise blue sky. There was Mordecai in the gate of the palace, making sure that Haman and everyone else there would know that he had no intention of bowing low to Haman. When Haman did get home, while he was very happy about being invited to the queen's banquet, he told his wife and family that it gave him no pleasure at all as long as Mordecai would not give him what he thought was his proper place. "That's easily resolved", said Zeresh, his wife. "Have some gallows built. Have Mordecai hanged on them for refusing to obey the king's commandment. Go on. You have the power. Get on with it. Then you'll really enjoy the banquet." "Yes, of course", said Haman. "That's an excellent idea. I'll do that straight away." He hurried away to make the necessary arrangements.

As it happened, the king had a sleepless night between the two banquets, and spent the time reading the journals of the palace records. In so doing, he came across the note about Mordecai's loyalty in reporting the plot to assassinate the king. "Oh", said the king. "What honour has been given to this brave man who saved my life?" "Well, nothing, really", he was told. "Right!" said the king. "Here comes Haman. We'll sort something out right away."

The king's words have often been quoted since they were included in the canon of scripture. "What shall be done to the man the king delights to honour?" Quite rightly, it is often taken as a picture of the delight of God the Father in asserting the glory and honour that is due to His Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Predictably, in the immediate circumstance which prompted the question, Haman assumed that he himself must be the person in the king's mind, so he quickly volunteered what to him would be the greatest possible honour imaginable. "Let the king's royal robes be brought and put on such a man. Let him ride on the king's own horse, and be conducted with great dignity throughout the city. Let his honour be heralded throughout the land." "That's great", said the king. "Do just that to Mordecai. Get on with it right now." Haman had no option but to carry out his own suggestion, verbatim, but for his arch-enemy Mordecai, and not for himself. When Haman got home, his wife's comment gave him no consolation. "If Mordecai is one of those precious Jews, you can't win. Just accept it as one of those things, and get on with life." Again, it was implicit in her remark that, whatever things might appear to be on the surface, God always has His eye upon His people.

Worse was to follow. At the second of Queen Esther's banquets, Ahasuerus, as before, asked her what was on her mind. This time, Esther came straight to the point. "I'll tell you what the problem is. I'm a Jewess, and there is legislation in existence with your name on it, authorising the execution of all Jews in the kingdom, including me." "Never!" said the king. "Who arranged this?" "It's him", said Esther, pointing to Haman. "He has organised this." The king was so annoyed and perplexed by this that he went out for a walk in the palace garden to calm down, cool off, and, presumably, to decide what to do next. While he was doing so, Haman got really agitated as he pleaded with Esther to persuade the king to spare his life. In fact, it got to the point where, in his excitement, he totally forgot himself and grabbed Esther where she was reclining on the bed. Just then the king came back in. "What's this!" he cried. "Are you going to abuse my wife, the queen of the land, and even in the palace, in front of my very eyes. How dare you. This is too much." At this point, one of the court officials drew the king's attention to the fact that the gallows Haman had had erected to hang Mordecai on were still standing, ready for action. "Excellent", said the king. "The very thing! Hang Haman on them without wasting any more time." As the saying goes, Haman was literally hoist on his own petard.

The king immediately promoted Mordecai to be his immediate deputy, the position previously held by Haman. He also authorised him to cancel the anti-Jewish legislation forthwith. Understandably, there was great joy among the Jews throughout the kingdom. Let me remind you of the spirit and mood of the occasion by reading 8:15 to 17: 'And Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a garment of fine linen and purple: and the city of Shushan was glad. The Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour. And in every province, and in every city, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a good day. And many of the people became Jews; for the fear of the Jews fell upon them.' I will also read 9:4: "Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame went out throughout all the provinces: for this man waxed greater and greater".

The king followed this up by asking Esther, "Are you satisfied now? Is there anything else you would really like me to do?" "Well", said Esther. "Really, to clinch the whole matter, if you will, it would be very reassuring for the Jews if the ten sons of Haman were to be hanged publicly so that there will be no fear of anything like this dreadful thing ever happening again." In those days, ruling families were so powerful that, when there was a change in dynasty, the new rulers felt it necessary to exterminate all surviving members of the previous ruling hierarchy, so as to prevent a backlash by surviving members of that family group. It was very harsh, but that was one of the facts of life in those days. In the present days of the free, unmerited grace of the Christian gospel, we find such an approach hard to stomach. We too easily forget that until the coming of Christ into the world, men treated each other very harshly indeed. Even now, if we reject the grace and love of God through Christ, we could find ourselves acting in just the same way.

After listening to Queen Esther's request, it did not take Ahasuerus long to make up his mind. "Fair enough", said the king. "Let it be done." Esther then made one further and last request. This was that these remarkable events, the deliverance of the Jews from their enemies and the amazing turn around in their fortunes, should be commemorated each year by the establishment of a special feast, called Purim. This also was authorised, and continues to be celebrated by godly Jews thousands of years after the event which prompted its establishment. And all because a remarkable young lady was not only very attractive in appearance, but was also wise enough to take the good advice given to her by her more mature cousin. She even had the courage to risk her own life by entering the king's presence without advance permission, contrary to all the court protocol.

Of course, as the recipients of the grace of God, it would not be appropriate for Christians to ask for those who oppose us to be given a public execution. We are taught to pray for those who spitefully use us, as the Lord himself said: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you.' (Matthew 5:44). The Apostle Paul reinforced this in Romans 12:14: 'Bless them which persecute you: bless and curse not.' Nevertheless, while the name of God is not actually mentioned in the Book, we Christians would be well advised to follow the godly example of Esther in her selfless approach to the way she dealt with such a dreadful problem. Then, like both Esther and her cousin Mordecai, the preserving hand of God would be evident throughout our lives.

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