



Queen Esther

Woman of Obedience, Intelligence, Humility, & Courage

The Story of Queen Esther

Esther 1: 1-6

Queen Vashti Deposed

This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, and in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.

For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa.

Esther 1:10-22

On the seventieth day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from the wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. But when the attendants delivered the King's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.

Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times and were closest to the king – Karshena, Shethar, Admantha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsina and Memukan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom. "According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?" he asked. "She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her."

Then Memukan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, "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. This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord.'"

"Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands from the least to the greatest."

The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memukan proposed. He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household, using his native tongue.

Esther 2:1-18

Esther Made Queen

Later when King Xerxes' fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. Then the king's personal attendants proposed, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem of the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." The advice appealed to the king and he followed it.

Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, who he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem. Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.

Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. And this is how she would go to the king. Anything she wanted was given to her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.

When the turn came for Esther (the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

Mordecai Uncovers a Conspiracy

When the virgins were assembled again, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up. During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.

But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were impaled on poles. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

Esther 3:1-15

Haman's Plot to Destroy the Jews

After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles. All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor.

Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" Day after day they spoke to him, but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.

In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, the pur (that is, the lot) was cast in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar. Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury."

So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman, son of Hannedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. "Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please." Then on the thirteenth day of the first month the royal secretaries were summoned. They wrote out in the script of each province and in the language of each people all Haman's orders to the king's satraps, the governors of the various provinces and the nobles of the various peoples. These were written in the name of King Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring. Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews – young and old, women and children – on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day. The couriers went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.

Esther 4:1-17

Mordecai Persuades Esther to Help

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. But he went only as far as the king's gate because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. In 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.

When 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. Then 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. So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate.

Mordecai 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. He 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 her to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, "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 scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, 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. 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?" Then Esther sent this reply to 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 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 Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

Esther 5:1-8

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given to you."

"If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him." "Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks." So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, "Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." Esther replied, "My petition and my request is this... If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question."

Esther 5:9-14

Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai. Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home. Calling together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, Haman boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honored him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials.

"And that's not all," Haman added. "I'm the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow. But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate. His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Have a pole set up, reaching to a height of fifty cubits, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai impaled on it. Then go with the king to the banquet and enjoy yourself." This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the pole set up.

Esther 6:1-14

Mordecai Honored

That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.

"What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" the king asked. "Nothing has been done for him," his attendants answered. The king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about impaling Mordecai on the pole he had set up for him. His attendants answered, "Haman is standing in the court." "Bring him in," the king ordered. When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?"

Now Haman thought to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?" So he answered the king, "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, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, 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 Haman. "Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended." So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!"

Afterward Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him – you will surely come to ruin!" While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared.

Esther 7:1-10

Haman Impaled

So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet, and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life - this is my petition. And spare my people - this is my request."

"For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed, and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king." King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is he - the man who has dared to do such a thing?" Esther said, "An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!"

Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. The king got up in a rage, left his wine, and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house!"

As soon as the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face. Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, "A pole reaching to a height of fifty cubits stands by Haman's house. He had it set up for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king." The king said, "Impale him on it!" So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided.

Esther 8:1-14

The King's Edict on Behalf of the Jews

That same day king Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her. The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate.

Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews. Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him. "If it pleases the king, and if he regards me with favor and thinks it is the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces. For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?", she said.

King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have impaled him on the pole he set up. Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring - for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked."

At once the royal secretaries were summoned - on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. They wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors, and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. These orders were written in the script of each province and the language of each people and also to the Jews in their own script and language.

Mordecai wrote in the name of King Xerxes, sealed the dispatches with the king's signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king. The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves, to destroy, kill, and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who might attack them and their women and children, and to plunder the property of their enemies. The couriers went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa.

Esther 8:15, 9:1-15

When Mordecai left the court, he was wearing royal garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold, and a purple robe of fine linen. And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration. For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. In every province and in every city in which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.

On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, the edict commanded by the king was to be carried out. On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them. The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those seeking their destruction. No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them. And all the nobles of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and the king's administrators helped the Jews, because fear of Mordecai had seized them.

Mordecai was prominent in the palace; his reputation spread throughout the provinces, and he became more and more powerful. The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them.

Study Guide

The Book of Esther tells of an incredible woman who comes into her own power when she realizes the fate of her people lie in her hands. She reveals her intelligence, becomes a savvy strategist, a calculated risk taker, and a powerful and commanding leader. Risking her own life, she finds the courage to use the gifts God gave her to save her people. Like all the women, there is much more to her story than you may have thought. Read the story of Queen Esther, and discuss the following questions.

1. What happened to Queen Vashti that left the position of queen open?

- When she was called by the king to come and perform for his friends and show off her body and her beauty, she refused. Fearing an uprising of the other men's wives if she got away with such behavior, the king's advisors told him to take away her position as queen and give it to someone more deserving.

2. What kind of a king was King Xerxes?

- Xerxes was more a party planner than a commanding king. He was wishy-washy and let his advisors talk him into making major decisions without taking the time to investigate the facts or the repercussions.

3. Since Mordecai had dealings with the king, Esther may have dreamed of being a queen when she was a young girl living in the shadow of the palace. Once she was selected to go to the palace with the other potential candidates that dream had the potential to become real. When she was taken into the harem what did she do?

- Unlike the others who asked for special beauty products, clothing, or special foods, Esther asked for nothing additional. Because of her beauty and humble nature, she was befriended by Hegai, the head eunuch in charge of the harem. Hegai was impressed with Esther and treated her kindly. He ordered special menus for her and provided her with beauty treatments. He also assigned seven maids specially chosen from the king's palace, and he moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem.

4. Before each young woman was taken to the king's chambers, she was given the prescribed twelve month of beauty treatments. What did this consist of?

- The first six months consisted of bathing and massaging with oil of Myrrh. The second six months consisted of bathing and massaging with special perfume oils and ointments. Only then would the woman be considered ready for a night with the king.

5. What advantage did Esther have through her friendship with Hegai?

- Hegai knew the king's likes and dislikes and he prepared her to please the king. Hegai mentored her and she did as he instructed when it was her turn to go to the king. While other women asked for extra jewelry, perfumes or clothing, Esther asked for nothing, using only what Hegai suggested. Esther's beauty and character won Xerxes heart, and he made her his queen.

6. When Esther was in the harem, Mordecai came by often to check on her and see how she was doing. What did he tell her not to do and why?

- He told her not to reveal to anyone that she was a Jew. He understood that even though Jews were allowed freedom to run businesses and even, for some, to participate in the government, they were still exiles in a land where some were descendants of their mortal enemies. It was important for the king to get to know and love Esther before he knew her as a Jew.

7. What act did Mordecai perform that would later save his life?

- While at the city gate one day, Mordecai overheard two guards plotting to assassinate the king. He told Esther and asked her to pass on the information and to make sure the king knew it came from him. The king had it checked out and found it true and had the two guards impaled. The act of Mordecai preventing the king from being assassinated was recorded in the book of chronicles that would later be read and the king, who had not rewarded him, would do so at the exact moment when Haman was going to ask the king to have Mordecai impaled. Once the king showed Mordecai favor, Haman could not ask for him to be killed.

8. When the king appointed Haman as prime minister, everyone was ordered to bow down to him as a sign of respect. Haman was an egotistical and evil man who reveled in having people bow down to him as if he were a god. Mordecai refused to bow before him and revealed that he was a Jew and he would bow before God alone. This refusal to bow before him filled Haman with rage and hate for Mordecai. Over time his hatred of Mordecai spilled into hatred for all Jews. What did Haman plan to do to Mordecai and the rest of the Jews?

- He planned to have Mordecai impaled upon a pole he had built and to have all the Jews eliminated by convincing the king that they were not loyal to him and that they were a threat to his kingdom. He asked the king for the finances and armies to eliminate the Jews and the king agreed to Haman's plans.

9. Again, what does this say about what kind of a king Xerxes was?

- Without investigating Haman's claims, or giving much thought or consideration to what he was asking, Xerxes agreed to allow the extermination of an entire nation of people. He was easily swayed by his advisors and high ranking officials, and did not make his own decisions or consider the repercussions of those decisions.

10. When Mordecai happened upon the plot Haman had planned for the Jews' extermination, he went to Esther and asked her to go to the king and plead for the lives of her people. What was Esther's reaction to his request?

- At first she was afraid and told Mordecai that to seek entrance to the king's inner court without being summoned was punishable by death, and she had not been called to him for a month. Mordecai told her that since the edict was to kill all Jews in Persia that would mean her also if she did not ask the king for mercy. Finally she agreed to intercede on behalf of her people.

11. Once she committed to helping save her people, she became the commanding leader she was destined to be. How did she implement her plan?

- She dressed in her finest royal robes and requested to approach the king in his royal chambers. Because she had learned first from Mordecai and then from Hegai how the politics of the palace functioned, she did not ask the king to save her people right away, but asked him to attend a luncheon with Haman in her chambers. When they arrived and ate and drank, the king asked what she desired and said she could have anything up to one half of his kingdom. She again asked only that they attend another lunch the next day and she would then give him her request. Only after much preparation and anticipation did she reveal her request by revealing that she was a Jew and was to be exterminated along with all the other Jews in Persia. When asked who would dare to threaten his most beloved queen, Esther pointed to Haman. The king was so enraged he went out onto the patio while Haman stayed behind to beg the queen to intercede on his behalf. Haman threw himself upon the queen just as the king came back inside. This act sealed his fate and he was impaled on the very pole he had built for Mordecai.

12. Was the king able to cancel the edict he had sent out to have all the Jews eradicated?

- Once issued, an edict of the king could not be canceled, even by the king himself.

13. How were the Jews saved?

- The king appointed Mordecai to replace Haman as Prime Minister and had him draft a new edict that would allow the Jews to defend themselves which saved them from elimination. Queen Esther is beloved by the Jews still today for her courage, faith, and devotion that saved her people. She is honored in the Purim celebration set up by Mordecai to remember that event and her as their savior.

What If...

The story of Queen Esther begins with a young girl living in exile, orphaned at a very early age and being brought up by her older cousin Mordecai. She is known to be very beautiful and obedient to Mordecai. When the king removes Vashti as Queen, an edict goes out to collect all the beautiful and young women in the kingdom and bring them into the harem. Esther's transformation from orphan girl to a true queen and leader is incredible and awe inspiring and has been written about by many biblical authors.

Not only is her story about what happened in her time, it is also about the legacy she left behind. As you read the Book of Esther, you may think she appears passive and assimilated into the culture of palace life, but you would be wrong. The Book of Esther is written from a man's point of view, and though it gives credit to Esther for saving a whole race of people, it focuses more on subterfuge and politics and less on what is actually happening within Esther as she grows into her position as queen and savior. Although the Book of Esther never mentions God by name, we can see his hand as her destiny unfolds and she becomes the central character of his divine plan.