

Esther, Queen of the Jews

Historical Background

In the Old Testament after the fall of the Northern (Israel) and Southern (Judah) Kingdoms, a remnant of Jewish people had been taken away into captivity by the Assyrians (721 B.C.) and then by the Babylonians (606 B.C.). The Babylonians were then conquered by the Persians in 536 B.C. under King Cyrus, who were later conquered by the Greeks in 331 B.C. under Alexander the Great.

The story of Esther took place under the Babylonian captivity, which lasted for 70 years, in about 473 B.C. Xerxes was the king of Persia at the time. In those days, the king was in absolute control in his kingdom. If anyone disobeyed an order from the king or even displeased the king, the king could have them put to death immediately. There were no trials or “due process” like we know in our world today. If the king said, “You die!”, then you died, and that’s all there was to it!

The True Story of Esther

The Story of Esther is a true story of incredible ironies, a story in which, once again, God used faithful men and women to deliver His people from the enemies that would destroy them!

At the opening of the book of Esther, King Xerxes ordered his queen, Queen Vashti, to do something she didn’t want to do. When the

queen refused to obey the king's command, he didn't have her put to death, but he did decide to get rid of her and look for a new queen to replace Vashti. Now Mordecai was a Jew who had been taken into exile by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, and his cousin, whom he had raised as if she were his own daughter, was Esther. Esther was a beautiful young lady who won the king's favor, and she became the new queen of King Xerxes. She did NOT tell the king about her nationality, that she was a Jew. In other words, she became like a secret agent!

Sometime later, Mordecai, who was involved in the politics of his community, happened to overhear talk about a plot by two men to assassinate the king. Mordecai told Queen Esther about the plot, and she passed the information along to King Xerxes. When the report was discovered to be true, the men who were plotting to kill the king were put to death by hanging on a gallows. The story was recorded in the king's annals. This was like a diary or record book of activities of his reign.

There was another man in the king's court named Haman. King Xerxes gave Haman a seat of honor that was higher than all the other officials, and the king ordered everyone in the kingdom to bow down to Haman. Well, you probably know that the Jews are commanded by God to bow down to NO ONE except God Himself, so as you can imagine, Mordecai had a real problem with this! He would not bow down to Haman or pay honor to him, and this really made Haman furious! He was enraged every time he passed Mordecai. Haman began to think of ways to get even with Mordecai, and instead of trying to kill Mordecai only, he decided

that he would try to find a way to destroy all of Mordecai's people the Jews. [Note: There have been numerous times in the history of mankind that people have tried to destroy all the Jews, including the Germans in World War II. Several countries in the Middle East today refuse to acknowledge the right of Israel to exist as a nation.]

Remember that Haman was King Xerxes right hand man! He told the king that there were some people [the Jews] scattered throughout the land whose customs were different from their own, and that these people were refusing to obey the king's commands. Haman recommended that an order be sent out to have these people all executed on a certain day. The property of the Jews that were executed would be given as a reward along with \$20,000, to the person who turned them in. He persuaded the king to sign such an order, and the order was sent out all over the kingdom. Remember, what the king said was the law, and no one could change this order except the king himself, and right now, the king was only listening to Haman.

When Mordecai and the Jews heard about this order, they were really upset, and they all put on sackcloth and ashes and began to fast and pray for God to help them in the face of this terrible order that would have them all killed in one day. It was really a terrible time. As if being in captivity, first by the Babylonians and now by the Persians wasn't enough, and now it looked like the entire Jewish nation might be killed because of this one evil man named Haman.

However, remember that Queen Esther was a “secret agent”! The king still did not know that his queen was herself Jewish! So Mordecai sent word to Queen Esther that she needed to go into the king’s presence and beg for mercy to save her people from execution by the king. Well, the king ruled with an iron hand, and no one was allowed to go to the king unless he called for them first. If someone asked to see the king, then the king could either agree to see the person, or else the person would be put to death. In other words, even though she was the queen, if Queen Esther asked to see the king, and he refused to see her, she would be killed. It was a risky thing to ask to see the king under any circumstances, but this was really a desperate time, so Mordecai told her, “If you remain silent at this time, deliverance for the Jews will come from some other source, but you and your family will die. And who knows, but what *you have come to this position of royalty for such a time as this?*” In other words, maybe this is the defining moment in Queen Esther’s life! Maybe this is why she was born and given her position in life. Likewise in our own lives, there will come a defining moment, when it will be clear that this is our purpose in life, that we were given a position in our own lives, “*for such a time as this!*” It is worth mentioning that Mordecai was confident that even if Esther did not speak up, the deliverance of the Jews would come from some other source.

Queen Esther’s decision? She called on all of her people to pray and fast for her for three days and three nights, and then she would go to the king. She said, “If I die, then I die!” So the people prayed and fasted, and three days later, Queen Esther risked her life by going to the king. The king accepted her visit, and he granted her request to

bring Haman and come to a banquet she had prepared for them that evening. The king agreed and sent for Haman. After some wine at the banquet, the king offered to grant Queen Esther any request she might have! Queen Esther's request was that the king and Haman come to a second banquet the next night, at which time she would present her request of the king.

Now Haman was delighted to be invited to the first banquet, and the second banquet sounded just as good to him. He was really in a good mood--that is, until he ran into Mordecai the next day, and as usual, Mordecai refused to bow down to him. Then the rage was back in Haman's heart. Haman was complaining to some friends of his about this Mordecai and the disrespect that he had been showing to Haman. His friends suggested that Haman build a special gallows 75 feet high, and ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it the very next day. This idea sounded great to Haman, so he had the gallows built.

That night, the king could not sleep! So he had someone bring in and read to him the annals of the king. One of the stories that they read to him was the story of how Mordecai had exposed the plot to kill the king. The king asked, "What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" The answer was that nothing had been done. Just about this time, Haman came into the king's lobby to ask the king if he could hang Mordecai the next day on the gallows he was having built. The king's attendants told the king that Haman was there, so the king said to bring him in.

The king said to Haman, “What do you think should be done for the man whom the king delights to honor?” Now Haman thought sure the king must have been talking about honoring Haman himself. He didn’t realize that the king was talking actually talking about honoring Mordecai! So Haman began to think of ways that the king could honor this “special person.” Haman said, “For this special person, let the king bring some royal clothing for him to wear, and put him on the king’s royal horse with a royal crest on the horse’s head. Then, have someone lead him through the city streets proclaiming “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!”

The king really liked Haman’s idea, so he commanded, “Go at once! Get the royal clothes, and the royal horse, and put it on Mordecai, and YOU lead him through the streets of the city proclaiming, ‘This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!’” Haman was mortified!!! Can you imagine how much Haman hated Mordecai?? And now Haman had to lead Mordecai on a royal horse for this special honor!!

After this, Haman was furious, but he didn’t have much time to be angry and feel sorry for himself. Before he knew it, it was time for Queen Esther’s second banquet! At the banquet, King Xerxes was anxious to know about Queen Esther’s request. After a little more wine, he was really in a good mood and he was really anxious to help her out. He offered her up to half of his kingdom. She told the king, “If I have found favor with you, would you please spare my people!” Now remember, the king didn’t even know who her people were—she was still a “secret agent.” She explained to the

king that her people were all about to be killed. King Xerxes said to Queen Esther, “Who is the man who has dared to do such a thing?” Queen Esther replied, “This wicked man is Haman!” The king got up in a rage, and Haman knew he was in trouble! Knowing what the king already had in mind, Haman began begging Queen Esther for mercy. This made the king even more angry. Then one of the king’s attendants pointed out the 75 foot gallows that Haman had built. The king ordered Haman to be hanged on his own gallows, the one he had prepared for Mordecai. That same day, King Xerxes gave the estate of Haman to Queen Esther, and Mordecai became even more prominent and powerful in the palace. The Jews got relief from their enemies, and the month that was supposed to be filled with sorrow was turned to joy and celebration.

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