



ESTHER

(Book of Esther)

THE PRINCESS WITH A SECRET

The book of Esther is unlike any other book of the Bible. It's a real-life story that's as captivating as a fairy tale: the journey of an ordinary peasant girl, whisked away to a palace to win the heart of the king. The story is not quite that simple and involves all sorts of grisly political and personal scheming, as well as ideas of marriage that are very different from our own. Esther is a love story. It's also about palace intrigue, and the miraculous rescue of God's people. But underlying all those things, it is a story first and foremost about family: Esther's family.

By contrast, the first act in the book is the picture of a family being torn apart. Xerxes, king of Persia, cast out his wife Queen Vashti for refusing to obey his commands. He then began the search for a new queen.

After the scene is set, we are presented with the real heroes of the story: Esther and Mordecai.

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, whom 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. (Esther 2:5-11)

Esther and Mordecai were not actually father and daughter. They were related by blood, but possibly only distantly. She is described as his "cousin," whom Mordecai had "taken . . . as his own daughter" because her father and mother had died (Esther 2:7). So immediately we learn that Mordecai was a kind man who saw a vulnerable child in need and acted. Repeatedly the Bible holds out to us the value of "found family," the idea that people not related by blood can still form deep bonds of care and community. The book of Esther shows us all the richness and blessing

that can come from that kind of family. In the Bible, families of choice are never second best. Ruth and Naomi are just as much family as are Jochebed and Miriam. And these "found families" are an important model of the love and grace of God through His adoption of us, and our own choice of faithfulness to Him.

Adoption is something we're exceptionally grateful for in my family. My mother was adopted at the end of World War II, back in the late 1940s. Whatever the circumstances of her birth, she was welcomed into a family of love. My grandparents poured their lives into their two daughters, both adopted, and created a place of security. I spent much of my childhood with them. It was where I felt safest and most loved, watching *The Price Is Right* and eating cottage cheese and unsalted peanuts when I was home "sick" from school. Had my mother come along thirty years later, who knows what her biological mom would have chosen. Millions of women in America face unplanned pregnancies every year. How overwhelmed and frightened many of them must be, wondering if it's possible to gather the emotional support and financial resources they would need to raise a child. I've often pondered what my biological grandmother's situation was. Was she in trouble? Afraid? Overwhelmed? In any case, I'm thankful she made what must have been an excruciating decision: to give her daughter life and then to give her away. That selfless decision created the family I treasure. It just so happens my best friend is adopted too! It's a blessing to watch as many of my friends have expanded their families by embracing children in need at all stages of their young lives—just as Mordecai did for Esther.

At the end of the previous quoted passage we see two statements that illuminate the relationship between the pair. Mordecai forbade Esther from revealing to anyone that she was a Jew,

and also every day he kept vigil outside the courtyard of the king's harem to find out how she was doing. What parent among us can fail to relate to Mordecai's watchfulness here? Pacing back and forth while waiting to hear how your loved one is doing is clearly a universal human experience. We see in this little snippet how Mordecai fulfilled the role of being a father to Esther, and just how deep his concern for her ran. Those of us with fathers who loved and cherished us when we were growing up know what it is to be warmed by that kind of protectiveness and care. Was Esther able to glance out the windows and see Mordecai there, keeping faithful watch over her? Surely his presence would have reassured and strengthened her.

In these Scriptures we see two important aspects of the father-daughter relationship: a father's protection, and a daughter's trust. The Bible tells us, in strong language, that Mordecai had "forbidden" Esther to reveal who she really was (Esther 2:10). For some reason he sensed either a danger or disadvantage in that piece of information being revealed, and he made it clear that Esther wasn't to divulge it. However that sounded to Esther, she didn't hesitate to follow Mordecai's guidance. Scripture tells us she hid her background specifically because that's what Mordecai had told her to do. She trusted him completely. Her obedience was a fruit of her trust. Mordecai and Esther model the qualities of mutual love and respect.

We also see that Esther's obedience wasn't isolated, that it was a lifetime habit:

But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she con-

tinued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up. (Esther 2:20)

Esther's obedience to Mordecai's instructions stands in stark contrast to the way this story started, with Queen Vashiti's disobedience.

At this point in the narrative the journeys of Mordecai and Esther diverged, and each had separate adventures. Esther continued to enjoy success in the high-stakes game of becoming the king's next queen, advancing from one level to the next until finally the king was more attracted to her than to any of the others. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Esther, Mordecai happened upon a plot to assassinate the king. In fact, it seemed to be indirectly because of Esther that he uncovered this plot, for it was while Mordecai was sitting at the palace gates waiting for word of his daughter that he overheard this conspiracy.

So while the two plots begin to follow separate trajectories here, the Bible emphasizes for us how much they spring from the relationship between father and daughter. Mordecai was in the position to know about the plot because of his vigil for Esther, while Esther continued to enjoy success because she was concealing her identity, just as Mordecai had instructed. Further, the Bible points out that she was following these instructions not just because they seemed wise to her, or because Mordecai had persuaded her to, but because this had been her habit from the time she was a child: she obeyed "just as she had done when he was bringing her up" (Esther 2:20). The trust and respect that Mordecai earned in her childhood were guiding Esther's life to a position of both safety and divine destiny.

It's often unpleasant as a parent to lay down the law with your children, and for kids it can be maddening to take direction when they see no purpose to the instruction. My six-year-old self was always trying to argue with my mom, though she clearly knew better. I didn't know what I didn't know! How many times in my adulthood have I thanked her for being "The Meanest Mom in the World"? I've lost count. While I may have stuck to the rules strictly out of a begrudging obedience all those decades ago, the older I get the more I appreciate the protective boundaries she built for me. Like all parents it's possible Mordecai got it wrong sometimes, especially since he had to learn on the job with his adopted daughter. But all the times he got it right served as building blocks of trust for the foundation of his relationship with Esther. That was what stayed with her, and her trust and obedience ended up saving not just her life, but also the lives of every Jew in the Persian Empire.

ESTHER'S LIFE IN DANGER

Esther had been chosen to be queen, but as she would soon discover that wouldn't guarantee her existence would be one solely of luxury and ease. Her primary source of trouble was the king's trusted counselor, Haman, who would make things even more complicated. Haman had a specific contempt for Mordecai, who refused to bow and grovel before him, as it appears most everyone else in the kingdom was willing to do.

To understand the deeper roots of the conflict that sparked between Mordecai and Haman, let's take a quick look back. Haman was an Amalekite (or Agagite), a people God had commanded the

Israelites to completely wipe out. After the Israelites had finished escaping across the Red Sea on their epic exodus out of Egypt, the Amalekites attacked them—unprovoked.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven." Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. He said, "Because hands were lifted up against the throne of the LORD, the LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation." (Exodus 17:14-16)

More than once God reminded the Israelites to take note.

Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and attacked all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God. When the LORD your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (Deuteronomy 29:17-19)

Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them. (1 Samuel 15:3)

But King Saul did not follow God's clear command.

He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.

Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel: "I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions." Samuel was angry, and he cried out to the LORD all that night. (1 Samuel 15:8-10)

Ouch. It's not just the Lord's short-term disappointment that Saul had to face. As we see in the story of Esther, the failure to do what God had directed the Israelites to do meant a very real threat remained and then multiplied. Though Agag was ultimately killed by the prophet Samuel, some remnant of his lineage clearly remained—and Haman was a descendant of his—an Agagite. Throw in the fact that Mordecai and Esther are believed to be from Saul's family and you can see the cataclysmic showdown coming.

It's against this backdrop that we see Haman's utter contempt for Mordecai and Mordecai's unequivocal refusal to bow to Haman as commanded. Here's where the real plot of the story begins.

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. (Esther 3:5-6)

At this point in history, Persia was home to thousands of Jews who had been taken there as captives after the destruction of the temple. Over the years, many of these Jews became accustomed to the culture and, even though Jews were eventually freely permitted to return to their homeland, they chose instead to stay. In Persia they found themselves residents of a large and cosmopolitan empire with many opportunities for advancement, a value for education and learning, and a high tolerance for minority groups. Esther and Mordecai's family was one among those who had apparently found prosperity and assimilation in Persia. Esther's Hebrew name, the text tells us, was Hadassah, but the fact that she went by Esther shows us that this was a young girl who had grown up as Persian as she was Jewish.

Despite their assimilation into Persian society, Haman clearly had an ongoing hatred for the Jewish people—along with a plan to wipe them out. He planned to use his position, and the king's authority, to get it done.

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 Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. "Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please." (Esther 3:8-11)

By convincing the king that the Jewish people presented a threat to his rule, Haman locked in Xerxes's full backing to wipe them out. What a diabolical plan. Yet God was well aware of Haman's schemes, and through Esther's obedience to Mordecai's protective guidance she was perfectly placed in the center of God's rescue plan.

I was fortunate enough to essentially have two "dads" in my life, the second being my stepfather, Jasper. As a young girl, I can remember being eager to master the skill of bike riding like the other kids in my neighborhood and to get rid of those training wheels! I assumed it was just as easy as the big kids made it look, but I quickly found out there was a steep learning curve. Jasper was the one who took the time to jog alongside me up and down the block over and over so I could try to find the balance to steady myself and take off on my own. It was a much harder (and much less fun) task than I thought I'd signed up for. After many failed attempts and wipeouts I put my hands on my hips, looked squarely at Jasper, and said, "You're trying to kill me!" Of course, he wasn't, and he knew just how badly I wanted to figure this thing out. He wasn't about to let me give up, left sidelined while the other kids zipped down our street. He also wasn't going to leave me to my own devices, determined to get on that bike—possibly tumbling into traffic. So, Jasper stuck with me. He guided me

and kept me moving forward. That's the protective heart of a father, and the dedication we see from Mordecai.

Esther became aware of the threat when Mordecai dressed in sackcloth and ashes—the traditional garb of mourning—and lay at the gates of the king's palace. It's fair to say this put the queen into an awkward position. Wearing sackcloth and publicly waiting at the gates of the palace could have been considered a legal form of protest. Sackcloth was actually banned inside the palace itself because only splendor and luxury were acceptable inside the gates. Maybe that's why Esther didn't know about the edict that had been sent out with the official blessing of King Xerxes: orders to destroy, kill, and annihilate every single Jew—young and old, including women and children. To top it off, attackers were free to plunder everything the Jewish people owned as well. Mordecai sent a copy of the murderous order to Esther, and asked her to step up and risk everything in an attempt to stop the massacre—go to the king. She must have been stunned and terrified at the news, but Esther also stopped to remind Mordecai (you know, just in case he'd forgotten) that to approach the king without being summoned would expose her to being executed on the spot. That kind of disobedience was not tolerated in the highly ritualized Persian court, and it was a risk she was not willing to assume . . . at least not yet.

One of the most important themes the book of Esther grapples with is the idea of obedience. Very early on, we learn Esther was raised to be an obedient daughter to Mordecai. Mordecai wanted from his daughter what all parents want for their children: a healthy respect for authority, in the hopes that this will keep them safe. Esther's deference to Mordecai created an adult whose

instinct was to obey and to trust authority. So what was she to do when the person who first taught her obedience—her adoptive father—was asking her to disobey her husband, the king? Let's not forget how that worked out for Vashni.

Mordecai left no room for doubt. His instructions were clear. Esther had a duty not just to him, but to their entire community. But wasn't she also bound to obey her king and husband? For the first time in her sheltered life, Esther experienced a profound conflict of obligation. She was not only compelled to obey Mordecai, but she was also obligated to respect the king. How was she to discern which path to choose? Her worlds were colliding: the one she'd been cautioned to hide and the one that made her the most celebrated and revered woman in the kingdom.

As she struggled to resolve her growing internal conflict, Mordecai's response to Esther was devastating:

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 your royal position for such a time as this? (Esther 4:12-14)

He started with a direct, pointed critique. *Oh, do you think you are somehow going to stay safe? Is your life more important to you than the future of your own people?* He confronted Esther with her initial instincts of cowardice and selfishness. I'm not blaming her; I can identify! We're born selfish, wired to be primarily concerned with our own safety and comfort. Which of us in Esther's position would really have thought differently, at least at first?

Parents are uniquely equipped to give us a reality check when we need it most, and that's what Mordecai did here. He asked Esther to see herself in the broader context of history, to imagine her critical role in the story of God's people. His high expectations for Esther called her to remember who she was and to accept the grave challenge divinely set before her.

In my life, my father, Ed, definitely didn't sugar-coat things. But he was deeply emotional about family heritage, often walking us through the names and dates of our ancestors. He wanted us to have an appreciation for where we'd come from, and to carry that forward with us in life. He was proud of our Irish heritage (where do you think I got my name?) and our deep roots as multigeneration Floridians. When I was growing up, he'd also take any chance to detour into neighborhoods where he'd once lived or worked as a young law enforcement officer. My brother, Eddy, and I would roll our eyes and say, "Not another trip down memory lane!" But as we got older we came to understand and appreciate what our father was doing. He wanted to remind us of our roots, to keep us tethered to things that mattered, no matter where life took us. Mordecai did the same for Esther, pointing her to who she really was and how that fact equipped her to do something extraordinary.

And like Mordecai my father never wanted us to rest on our laurels. I can distinctly remember the morning after I'd placed in the top ten at Miss America, excited about the achievement but disappointed I'd lost. We were sitting at breakfast, having a chat. My dad was proud, but he also didn't want me to plateau at this first big milestone in my life. He said, "Don't let this be the most exciting thing that happens in your life." In a way I can hear Mordecai saying something similar to Esther. *Okay, so you*

won a beauty pageant. You've got a much bigger assignment now, so get to it!

At Mordecai's reproof, Esther rose to the occasion:

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 4:15-17)

All of a sudden, Esther was jolted into remembering her true self—her Jewish heritage, not her Persian stardom. In the beginning of the story, we saw that Esther was a young woman of two names: her Hebrew name Hadassah and her Persian name Esther. It was the Persian part of Esther that was so concerned with appearances, with paying honor to civil authority above all else, with worrying about what would happen to her personally. But it only took a few well-aimed words from her adoptive father to remind her of who (and what) she really was.

At his best, that is what a father does. Mordecai was concerned not with Esther's temporary, earthly safety, but with the compelling task she'd been assigned. Good fathers remind us that we are more than what consumes us on a daily basis—worries about money, and career, and reputation. The best kind of father mirrors our relationship with our heavenly Father. A father will demand more of us than we think we have to give, and he will rejoice with us when we discover that we can do more than we

thought we could. Just like Jasper and that pink Huffy Sweet Thunder bike I eventually mastered! And whether or not your relationship with your earthly father is a good one, never doubt that your heavenly Father is always cheering for you.

It is not an accident that the father-daughter relationship in the Bible that may best mirror the beauty and fulfillment of our father-like relationship with God is this adoptive relationship between Esther and Mordecai. Not all fathers and daughters are biologically related—just as we are grafted into our spiritual relationship with God. But Mordecai chose Esther, just like God chose us. Mordecai looked at this vulnerable, orphaned little girl and said, *I will take care of her*. Mordecai's humble earthly actions mirror the cosmic actions of God reaching into the world, in His choosing us. God could have simply given us life, like He did with the animals, the birds, the fish—but they are not sons and daughters of God. He is divinely invested in the lives of believers. God has made a way for us: first in His adoption of the people of Israel as His own family, and then in the adoption of all of us through Christ's sacrifice.

So: What did Esther do, once Mordecai had reminded her of who she really was? Her instructions were simple and clear:

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. (Esther 4:16)

First, she gathered the community. Esther did not say, *Give me some time and space to figure this out myself*. She knew great

power can come when a community is gathered together, assembled as the people of God. Not only that, but she also knew that on a human level she needed their strength and support. Never has this principle been more real to me than during the earliest days of the pandemic, when most of us were suddenly cut off from physically gathering together in our houses of worship. I had relished Sundays, knowing that however the world would beat me up during the week I was safe and with kindred spirits in those pews.

Watching services at home just wasn't the same for me. I was grateful the option was available but deeply missed singing together and sharing the burdens in a tangible way. Our communion—such as it was—consisted of saltine crackers and Pedialyte. When we finally ventured out to church at an event on the road in Dallas, Texas, I confessed what we had been using to humbly celebrate the Lord's Supper. A sweet church member assured me I wasn't alone. "Honey, we've been using sweet tea and Ritz crackers!" she said. It made me see that we were never alone (and chuckle). We really did have a community weathering the anxiety and fear together, and that's where Esther turned in her moment of deepest need. Scripture tells us that "where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). The spiritual power that comes from the gathering of the community—wherever and however we may be dispersed at the moment—can exponentially increase our individual pleas.

Second, Esther specifically called on the people to fast. This can be a charged topic! There are many Christians for whom fasting is not a regular practice today. But it was crucial to the

lives of God's people in the Old and New Testaments. Fasting was a sign of repentance and humility before God, a way of underscoring our complete dependence on Him. But it was also a way of cultivating deep focus. When the Christian community at Antioch was sending Barnabas and Paul out on their mission journey, they united their prayer with fasting:

While they were worshipping the LORD and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:2-3)

In this passage, we see fasting as not just an aspect of supplicatory prayer but of worship itself. Jesus Himself commended fasting (Matthew 17:21) and assumed that it was not a question of *if* His followers would fast, but *when* (Matthew 6:16). Fasting continued to be a part of the Christian tradition for hundreds of years, concentrated most famously not only in times before the festivals of Christmas (in Advent) and Easter (in Lent) but also on other occasions throughout the year. When performed as a community, fasting is and was an especially powerful spiritual tool, which Esther used to her advantage.

Abstaining from food is not in itself a holy activity. Plenty of people go without food for reasons of vanity, health, or poverty. It is only when fasting is dedicated to God in an intentional and meaningful way, and when the time that would have been spent on eating is spent instead in prayer, that fasting becomes powerful. Notice what Esther said: "I and my attendants will fast as you

do" (Esther 4:16). Fasting was not something she asked the community to do on her behalf, but to do along with her.

Finally, note Mordecai's reaction to Esther's newfound courage and spiritual wisdom: "So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions" (Esther 4:17). At the beginning of the story, Esther obeyed Mordecai faithfully, following all his commands. But near the end of the story, their positions are reversed: Mordecai is the one following Esther's instructions. At their best, fathers instill confidence in their daughters. Yes, obedience is key before we're old enough to reason through difficult decisions for ourselves. Ultimately, though, the goal is to raise young women to know truth, to recognize when God has placed them in a position to act, and to teach them to call on the courage they'll need in the moment. Esther had the wisdom and bravery to meet her challenge when it arrived.

THE HAPPY ENDING

For Esther, everything hung in the balance. She had pledged to break the rules and go to the king once the period of fasting was completed, and now it was go-time. She donned her royal robes and headed to the king's court. Esther was resigned to her fate, convinced she was meeting her destiny head-on when she approached the king.

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. (Esther 5:2)

Here begins the happy ending of Esther's perilous journey. Not only was Xerxes glad to see Esther, but he also told her to ask for anything, "up to half the kingdom, it will be given you" (Esther 5:3).

Esther's predecessor, Queen Vashti, was banished by the king because of her lack of obedience to his commands. Esther, presumably, was chosen as a replacement at least in part because she was not only beautiful but also young and pliable. Mordecai had taught her the value of obedience growing up, making her well suited to be the king's companion. But her whole story hinged on the moment when Esther had to be *disobedient*. She had to break the laws of the king's court. Part of understanding and embracing true obedience is knowing when to disobey one edict in order to comply with a different, higher call.

Esther disobeyed spectacularly, and it paid off. The king was pleased to admit her (and throughout the story the unspoken truth seems to be that the king is quite taken with her), and Esther's life was spared. Given the chance, she didn't ask for even a fraction of the kingdom. This wasn't about her; it was about her people. She invited the king to a banquet along with Haman. Xerxes immediately accepted the invitation, and when he showed up the king again asked Esther what *he* could do for *her*. Notice how the king was eager to obey Esther now! She must have had an air of command about her. The king's crush on his bride peeks through too in his desire to grant nearly anything she could wish.

She invited them both back to a banquet the next day. Was she nervous, stalling for time? The Bible doesn't tell us, but it's clear she had lulled Haman into a deep sense of security. He left that

first feast "happy and in high spirits," but they quickly soured when he saw Mordecai refusing to acknowledge him or show any fear in his presence (Esther 5:9). We're told he burned with rage. He soothed himself by calling together his friends in order to brag about his wealth, his position, and the two invites he'd scored from the queen. When Haman unloaded his disgust for Mordecai, his wife and his friends advised him to build a giant gallows and hang the Jewish man in the morning.

If you've studied Esther's story, then you know the amazing twist that comes next. While Haman was dreaming of his dastardly plan, King Xerxes couldn't sleep at all. He asked that old record books be brought to him and read. It reminded him of Mordecai's role exposing an assassination attempt on the king. Xerxes asked how Mordecai had been honored and found that nothing had been done. Note also that Mordecai had never demanded a reward or recognition. He'd neither lodged a complaint with the palace guard, nor fired off an angry letter to Persian customer service. Had their positions been reversed, you better believe Haman would have handled it differently and we've got proof!

As the king began to think about how to adequately thank the man who'd saved his life, Haman had entered the palace courts. He was headed to the king to ask for permission to kill the man the king wanted to honor: Mordecai. When Xerxes asked Haman for ideas about celebrating someone special, Haman (of course!) assumed he was the VIP about to take the spotlight. So (of course!) he proposed an elaborate, very public display of appreciation. That meant Haman spent his day making sure Mordecai was decked out in a royal robe, on one of the king's horses as Haman led him through the streets telling people, "This is

what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" (Esther 6:10)—you know, instead of killing him. Every time I read this passage I'm gobsmacked! Haman had spent so much of his time being outraged that Mordecai wouldn't give him the respect he demanded. There are few reversals in the Bible more poetic than this one, and we're not even close to being done.

Haman had just enough time to go home and complain to his wife again before it was time to return to the second banquet with Queen Esther. Here's where it really gets good. The king once again asked what he could do to make Esther happy. She responded by asking him to spare her life and the lives of her people. Imagine how confused Xerxes must have been at first. He asked who could have devised such a scheme, and this was Esther's moment. She pointed right at Haman and called him out on the spot. The king was so angered he walked out into the palace garden. While Xerxes was gone Haman began to beg Esther for his life, and he was literally falling onto the couch where she was seated as the king walked back into the room.

The king exclaimed, "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?" (Esther 7:8)

You guessed it: things were about to go from bad to worse for Haman. At that very moment, one of the king's servants piped up. *Just so happens there's this giant gallows at Haman's house that he made for Mordecai—you know, that guy who saved your life.* The king's direction was swift: use it for Haman. Y'all!

I have to believe there were very real, concrete moments of extreme fear for Esther all through this journey. Yet she had relied on the counsel of Mordecai, honoring him as an obedi-

ent daughter and brave truth-teller when it mattered most. No blockbuster movie would be complete without an epic reveal, and Esther had one.

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 8:1-2)

The king seems delighted to have finally met his wife's family, and equally pleased to extend extravagant honors to Mordecai. The king gave Mordecai his highest seal of approval, his signet ring—which had previously belonged to Haman. Esther no longer had to worry about how her adoptive father was doing outside the palace gates. Together, Esther and Mordecai ushered in God's deliverance for His people.

While no royal decree could be undone, Xerxes allowed Mordecai to script another royal edict. He drafted one that not only gave the Jewish people the right to assemble and defend themselves, but it also allowed them to "annihilate" anyone who came against them and to take the attackers' possessions as their own. Couriers rode "fast horses especially bred for the king" (Esther 8:10), and they fanned out to make sure that the second decree got to the farthest reaches of the Persian empire. The retribution against Haman's family and against all those who had been poised to murder the Jews was total. God did not tolerate those who plotted against His people.

In the end Mordecai and Esther stood united, proud to be family. Again and again, the book of Esther offers us reflections of our own lives, our own selves, and our own families. We have seen how Mordecai offers us the ideal of an earthly father in his care and protection of Esther. We have also seen how in choosing to take in Esther, Mordecai points us to our heavenly Father, who has chosen to adopt us. Here at the end, Mordecai points us heavenward once again. As Mordecai and Esther gather joyfully before the throne of the king, united at last, we see the true end and goal of family life: reunion before that other, greater throne in heaven, where our own families will someday finally and truly be fulfilled as they were meant to be.

The book of Esther goes on to explain how all these events are the origin of the festival of Purim, celebrated by Jewish communities today throughout the world. The carnival atmosphere of Purim is unlike any other Jewish holiday. There is very little solemnity in Purim, and nothing of sorrow. It is all joy. The reading of the book of Esther in synagogues today is the center of Purim. Congregations shout, "Blessed be Mordecai!" and "Cursed be Haman!" at appropriate points in the story, and there are often skits and plays telling the story of Esther, with costumes and carnivals for children. Purim is pure unadulterated joy, because Purim means the survival of the Jewish people not just from the threat of Haman, but also from the threat of all the Hamans throughout the centuries who have sought to destroy God's people.

The last verse of Esther gives us a final glimpse at Mordecai's character. He didn't simply gloat or coast for the rest of his tenure as the king's most trusted adviser.

He worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews. (Esther 10:3)

That possibility and commitment sprang up from one simple family: one father and one daughter, who always had each other's backs. Just as the love and mutual care of Jochbed and Miriam brought about the liberation of their people, so the love of Esther and Mordecai saved the Jews from destruction. God kept His promises to His people, through earthly parents and children committed to faithfulness long before the glorious end result was clear.

Lord God, give us Your joy. We know that our own families and relationships are not always perfect. May the devotion of Esther and Mordecai to each other spur us to appreciate our loved ones, especially when life is difficult. May we always hear Your word speaking to us, even when our own fears make it hard to hear. Give us Esther's boldness and Mordecai's faithfulness. Help us to open our arms to Your love and to the love of our family.

Esther Study Questions

1. How does Esther's story model the importance of family in the absence of biological parents?
2. Why did Mordecai tell Esther to hide her identity in the beginning of her story? (Esther 2:20) Is it ever okay to counsel the people under our care to be less than truthful?
3. What does Esther's story tell us about the long-term impact of failing to obey God's commands? (1 Samuel 15; Esther 3:5-6)
4. Why is it important for us to speak truth to those we love? (Esther 4:8-17) How difficult can this be within a family?
5. How important is a faith community when you're struggling with a tough decision or painful challenge? (Esther 4:16; Matthew 18:20) What is the role of fasting and prayer?
6. Does Esther's story give you confidence that God is perfectly placing you where He needs you to be as part of His perfect plan? How can you meet fear and doubt when the enemy tries to tell you otherwise?