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Esther

Captive in a Strange Land

Esther 2—4

The emotional effects of dysfunctional family life in today's society are commonly discussed in books and on talk shows. Many people have to cope with disadvantaged beginnings. It is a significant problem, especially for people who are caught in such circumstances. But for a culture as psychologized as ours, it can become the excuse for poor behavior. We can choose to be victims of our circumstances.

GROUP DISCUSSION. As you look over your life, what factors are outside of your control?

What are you most sorry about, or what makes you the most angry?

How do you keep from letting your disadvantages limit you as a person?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Look at your attitude toward life and consider whether you are dwelling on the negatives instead of overcoming your difficulties.

Esther is certainly a disadvantaged young woman. But she is a woman with inner strength. She does more than cope. We have no idea how many tears she shed, but she rises to make the most of the circumstances in which she finds herself. Read *Esther 2—3*.

1. What factors in Esther's life are outside of her control?

2. What could she control?

3. Reread questions 1 and 2, putting your name in place of Esther's. How relevant are these questions in your life?

4. Describe the situation of the women who are chosen (2:2-4, 12-14).

5. What details of the story give you insight into Mordecai's character?

6. Read *Esther 4*. How did Mordecai handle this outrage against the Jews (4:1-4, 7-8, 12-14, 17)?

7. What philosophical/theological understanding undergirds the request Mordecai makes of Esther?

8. What three arguments does he use to persuade Esther to act (4:13-14)?

9. When threatening circumstances arise, what makes it difficult to believe that God is at work behind the scenes?

10. How is Esther's reply (4:15-16) a confession of faith, even though she does not mention God?

11. Looking back over this part of the story, in what ways does Esther overcome her circumstances?

12. What do you do when circumstances hem you in?

What are your options?

Ask God to help you see clearly what circumstances in your past need to be overcome because they are limiting your freedom to be all that God wants you to be.

Now or Later

Record all the evidence you can muster that assures you that your life is safe in God's hands. Like Mordecai, are you certain that life is not just a collection of random events but rather that it is controlled by God?

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Esther Courage to Act

Esther 5:1-8; 7-8

All the great stories of history are about virtues like loyalty, honor or courage fleshed out in someone's life circumstances. We need to see how these virtues look in a fellow human being so we can choose them for our own lives. Then we realize that fear can be laid aside and the right action taken, even though the outcome is uncertain.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What is courage? Do you need it only in times of danger? What helps a person to make the leap from paralyzing fear to courage? Relate a time when you felt yourself take that leap.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. The psalmist wrote, "When I am afraid, I will trust in you. . . . In God I trust, I will not be afraid" (Psalm 56:3-4). What are your first thoughts in times of fear or stress? Who do you turn to?

Historically, Esther's courage to go to the king saved a nation. More personally, her courage becomes a model for us. Her circumstances may read like a tale from *The Arabian Nights*, but her decision to risk doing what was right is the kind of decision anyone can make. Read *Esther 5:1-8*.

1. Imagine that you are Esther. What thoughts might you have as you stand in the inner court of the palace?

2. In the face of the king's extravagant offers, why do you think Esther plans one banquet, then another?

3. Read *Esther* 7—8. What approach does Esther use in making her twofold request of the king (7:3-4)?

4. How does Esther dare to be so bold in naming the enemy of the Jews (7:6)?

5. What irony do you see in the fate of Haman and the advance of Mordecai in the king's court?

What biblical principles are underscored by these events?

6. How does the fate of the Jews still hang on Esther's reputation with the king (8:3-6)?

7. When have you gone beyond your own interests to get the privileges you have gained extended to others?

8. How does the king show his trust in Esther (8:7-8)?

9. Could you be trusted to be fair with a decree you might write against your enemies? Why or why not?

10. Every heroic story could be drastically changed by a series of "what if" scenarios. Suggest a "what if" alternative and its consequences for this story.

What can you apply to your own life from the scenario you have chosen?

Ask God to show you the difference you can make for someone else, as well as for yourself, if you trust and obey what he asks you to do.

Now or Later

Read chapters 9—10 to finish the story of Esther. The Days of Purim are still commemorated by the Jewish community. The way in which God worked through Esther is an awesome story to celebrate.