

# ***For Such a Time as This***

*International Women's Day*

**10 Day Devotional Series on the Book of Esther**

**March 1-10, 2021**

Also available in the "ICOC NE" App



FOR SUCH  
A TIME AS  
THIS

WOMEN'S SERVICE  
MARCH 7, 11AM

Sisters of New England!

We are in a unique time in our world. A time when God wants to use our faith as disciples of Jesus. A time to bring change and hope to a hurting, troubled, and divided world. We cannot remain silent; we need to lift our voices to God and share the good news of Jesus. For such a time as this, sisters!

Esther is an incredible example for us—a woman, an outsider, a Jew—used by God to save his people. All at a time when the world frowned on women, outsiders, and Jews. But God chose to use her!

Our hope is that this study will be a tool to help us all as we prepare our hearts and minds for celebrating International Women’s Day. Let’s look to Esther to see how we too can rise up and be women God can use to change this world!

**BRIEF EXPLANATION:** Drama, power, romance, intrigue—this is the stuff of which best-selling novels are made. But far from a modern piece of fiction, those words describe a true story, lived and written centuries ago. More than entertaining reading, it is a story of the profound interplay of God’s sovereignty and human will. God prepared the place and the opportunity, and his people, Esther and Mordecai, chose to act. (Application Study Bible)

**PURPOSE:** To demonstrate God’s sovereignty and his loving care for his people.

**AUTHOR:** Unknown. Possibly Mordecai. Some have suggested Ezra or Nehemiah because of writing style.

**DATE WRITTEN:** Approximately 470 B.C.

**SETTING:** Persian Empire **KEY PLACE:** King’s Palace

**KEY PEOPLE:** Esther, Mordecai, King Xerxes I, Haman and Vashti

**THEME VERSE:** Esther 4:14. 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?

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Day 1 / Chapter 1

## The Destructive Path of Entitlement

Samenthur Neptune-Blake, Greater Hartford

The book of Esther is the namesake of a very beloved biblical heroine in the bible, but it's also not just about the would be Queen Esther. It is also about Queen Vashti, whom many of us skip over in our excitement to get to Esther's story. Today I'd like us to stop for a bit and take another look at this passage.

Before sitting down to type my thoughts, I listened to several versions of the story of Esther written with children in mind...you know what? Vashti was all but erased in those accounts. I was pretty shaken by that because it was then that I really considered how I have maybe been a bit too quick to put Vashti into a corner. Why was it that I could look past her so easily? What influenced me to respond to her story in this way? What about you, what are your thoughts about Vashti? What did she do that was so "dishonorable"... say "NO" to the king...?

Let's take a few moments to unpack this together. I always say when reading the bible, we must always remember context...context...context. Vashti was a queen, with entitlement. She was powerful in her own right BUT, she was still a woman in a patriarchal society! We cannot read this chapter with 21st century eyes, without taking note of her 5th century BCE eyes. Vashti says "NO" to the King! He literally holds her future in his hands. When it comes to him, she has no rights. Do you see what we are working with here? This is an incredibly courageous and dare I say inspiring act by Vashti.

In vs. 1-8, we get a glimpse into the "day" that changed the trajectory of Vashti's life forever. The King was concluding a 180 day show and tell of all his wealth and splendor, that's a six month show and tell! After this, he proceeds to have a seven day banquet and this is no small event. Everyone, not just the dignitaries are invited. I mean wow!, there's no way anyone would want to miss this, it's the party of the century! The king even lifted restrictions on drinking... it was a free for all. This is speculation on my part, but I'm thinking that this is most likely not a co-ed event.

***10** On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas **11** 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.*

King Xerxes has spent six months showing off all his amazing possessions and on this final night of the banquet, when he is “high in spirits” or as I interpret it “drunk”, he wants to bring out his final possession his “trophy” Vashti. Let’s take a moment to assess this here. There are hundreds of men who have most likely been drinking uncontrollably, the king is in an altered state of mind, and an amazingly beautiful woman, more than likely she’ll have a few of her handmaidens with her is being commanded to come into this “what I would presume” out of control orgy like environment. What would you do?

**12** But when the attendants delivered the king’s command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.

As King, it was Xerxes’ right to demand whatever he wanted. As king, he could exact whatever punishments he so desired. It was this night though, that his entitlement took a path of utter destruction. To him, Vashti was a possession, his possession. I think we can infer, based on his request that he is in no way seeing this from her vantage point. Why would he, when he believes that he is deserving of all the privileges at hand, with a right to special treatment. How do you exercise your “christian privilege”?

I don’t know Vashti’s reasoning, I can only infer here, but it is in this decision of hers that I have learned to have the utmost respect for her. It is here that she rises from the pages of this chapter to become a hero to me. As a victim of sexual abuse, I know what it feels like to be muted. To live as someone’s possession to do with as they see fit. Saying no for me was inconceivable because I seemingly had no power, no rights. What would happen to me? I can’t lose what I have now even if it’s slowly killing me inside. How can I say no?

I am so grateful that God found it fit to show me Vashti’s courage and her ability to have boundaries when everything pointed to her having “no choice”. She said “NO” in the most public and life threatening of situations. I may never know the true reasons why she did what she did, but her courage serves as inspiration to any one who has experienced the helpless spaces of domestic violence, assault, sexual slavery, abusive employers and the silent corners of hopelessness that many find themselves in.

**16** 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. **17** 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.’ **18** 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.*

Vashti's disobedience to the king brought her "career" and maybe quality of life to an abrupt end. Her fate was deliberately meant to serve as an object lesson to women everywhere to "obey" in silence.

There are still many Vashti's all over the world today, women who are punished because they say no, women who are stuck in situations that seem impossible to escape whether emotionally or physically. It is imperative that we as women who are committed to the gospel, see each other through the lens of Christ, taking the time to listen to what is and isn't said by the women in our lives.

Vashti, much like Lot's wife, Jobs wife, Orpah and others can get the "side eye" from us, but we don't know their story, or their why's. Each of these women made choices and said things that were counter cultural and against the entitlement culture that they were a part of. Vashti should be given a second glance by us. She was entrenched in a culture saturated with male and royal entitlement. She made a choice to have boundaries, choosing to keep her self worth over her position of privilege. Vashti risked it all with no guarantees that it would turn out ok for her.

As I bring this time of unpacking chapter one of Esther with you to a close, I cannot help but be reminded of Jesus' interaction with women while living in a society of male dominance and privilege. He always used his entitlement to give voice to those that were marginalized and forgotten, setting healthy boundaries and expectations in regard to his relationships. I am so grateful for the security and freedom that we can have in Christ because of the ultimate sacrifice he has made for us on the cross. Jesus gives us the ability to say no to ungodliness. He allows us true freedom and calls us to speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves. We are called to judge fairly and defend the rights of the poor and needy (not just physically) for at the foot of the cross, we are all equal recipients of underserved grace.

### **Let's Pray**

Wonderful and merciful God, We are amazed by your love and power. As we live in a very fallen and broken world, we wait and pray for your imminent return. We desire to live lives that are pleasing to you here on earth. Thank you for giving us a voice, for helping us know that we are worthy in your sight. Thank you for redeeming us and bringing us into the privilege of your kingdom here on earth the church. Lord, help us to remember that even though we may lack privileges here on earth and have much to divide us, that we all one in you. Help us to contend as one and lift each other up always before you. To God be the Glory forever and ever. Amen

Day 2 / Chapter 2

## The Golden Heart Wins the Crown

Mary Nell Maule - Groton, New London

*Read Esther Chapter 2*

Most of us know the prettied-up story of Esther—Esther was in a beauty contest and chosen over all the girls to be queen so that she could save her people. In reality, Esther was an orphaned Jewish captive in a pagan country. She, along with many other girls, was taken into the king's harem and trained as a concubine. Like all the other Bible heroes, she did not know the end of the story. She probably did know that Vashti had been deposed for failing to come when the king called her, not something that would have made her excited about her opportunity to be chosen by the king.

But she also knew God. Her circumstances—as a captive in a strange land, as an orphan, as an innocent young woman in an impossible situation—did not make her give into discontent or fear. She trusted God and the people God had put in her life. Her cousin Mordecai had brought her up and nurtured her to know God and to trust his plan. She also trusted Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the harem and listened to his advice.

So what is a 21<sup>st</sup> century American woman supposed to do with this story?

1. Guard your heart from discontent and fear. Our situation we are in or what others have done to us, no matter how difficult, are never an excuse to give in to discontent (Prov. 4:23, Phil. 4:11-13.) What situations tempt you to be discontented or cowardly? What can you do today to overcome?
2. God is trustworthy no matter what. Esther didn't know God's plan, but her story is here to remind us that he always works things out for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28.) What are the areas of your life in which it is difficult to trust God? Write them down and pray about them.
3. Listen to advice. Yes, we know this one! Esther couldn't have completely understood the advice of Hegai (or Mordecai for that matter!) but she listened and followed their advice (Prov. 12:15, 19:20.) God had put them in Esther's life. And they had proven themselves to be trustworthy and to have Esther's best interests at heart. What keeps you from seeking and following advice? Are there areas of your life where you resist advice? Pray about them and talk to someone today.

Day 3 / Chapter 3

## The Downfall of Approval Addiction

Jan Smith - Southern CT

What makes someone courageous? What makes someone able to swim against the tide of public opinion and approval? Public approval is a fickle thing today. It's easy to gain and even easier to lose, yet the desire for approval is universal. We like being liked, and who doesn't want the approval of those they care about? We can desire people's approval so much though that we bend to their opinions rather than biblical truth or depend on their convictions and not develop our own. If it goes unchecked, it can even become an addiction.

### Definition of approval addiction

"Our human need for bonding sometimes goes a little haywire. This is especially true when you continually look to others for approval, even to the point of becoming addicted to what other people think of you. Known as approval addiction, this behavioral health condition is defined as an intense desire to win the approval of those around you and avoid feelings of rejection at all costs." *American Addiction Centers 2019*

In the Book of Esther, Chapter 3, Mordecai risks rejection on a massive scale. He disobeys the king's order and not just once, but day after day, and he does it alone.

"1After 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. 2 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.

3 Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?"

4 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.

5 When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. 6 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."

Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman or pay him honor, which could be interpreted as worship. Was it because he refused to worship anyone but God? Was it because Haman was a descendant of Israel's ancient enemy? Perhaps both? The chapter doesn't say, but Mordecai's refusal to obey the king's command could have gotten him killed. Certainly, Haman thought it a



crime worthy of genocide, but Mordecai not only made a stand, he made it as public as it could be. He stood at the *king's gate*, where all would see and hear of his actions.

Every time I read this chapter, I'm impressed by his courage. I admire his calm determination. I confess that I'd be tempted to call out sick, change jobs, or relocate. Yet he put aside public approval to stand up for God alone. How did he do it?

Because he wasn't alone. Mordecai had the righteousness of God on his side. The Word of God strengthened him. Jewish families in Persia stuck together, keeping the Word and memory of God alive. We also have these benefits and even more. We have the Spirit of God living in us. We have the promises of Jesus to support and defend us, and we have each other. We have everything we need.

Mordecai also had a lifetime of making faithful decisions. He had decided long ago that God's approval was the only one worth having. This is conjecture, but I have to believe that no one could do what he did without bone-deep convictions.

I'd like to believe that if I ever needed to make a mighty stand, I'd have the faith and guts to do it. I won't though if I care more about what people think than what God thinks. Every compromise I might make will whittle away my faith cut by cut. That's not what I promised God when I became a disciple. That's not what we promised. Jesus is lord today, tomorrow, and always, everywhere and in every situation.

Here's a few things to consider as we journey together through the Book of Esther.

1. Is there any situation you're currently facing where you need to stand up for righteousness?
2. Is there *anyone's* approval that you would compromise for?
3. Where do you think you need to grow in your public expression of faith? If you aren't sure, pray and then ask someone who knows you well.

If you feel that you aren't where you want to be, take heart! Each day holds new opportunities, and our Almighty Father will guide us and help us stand.

Thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts, and may we draw closer together with courageous faith to face the challenges of being a disciple in today's broken world.

Day 4 / Chapter 4

## One Step of Courage can Shake the World

Sydney Caswell - Worcester

*Read Esther 4:1-17*

Have you ever felt like you were in the right place at the right time? The parking spot that opens up at precisely the moment you need it. Yay! When you are the last person in line to make it in just before they close. Phew! When you reach out to that girl that reveals she was just “praying to find a friend and a church” she could get involved with. Wow!

Esther chapter 4 seems like a “right place at the right time” scenario for Esther. This chapter contains one of the most recognized verses in the Old Testament, **(Esther 4:14) “And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”** Mordecai speaks truth into Esther’s fearful heart – helping her to see the God-picture. What looks like an obstacle may be an opportunity. Perhaps God worked from the very beginning of Esther’s life to bring her to this point, at this time, and this decision. Is it possible that God looked ahead and designed Esther’s heart and faith to meet this specific need at this specific time? **(Psalm 139:13-16, Acts 17:26)**. Esther has the opportunity to save not only her life but the lives of many.

Q: Can you think back to a situation when you were in the right place at the right time, and God used you?

Q: What obstacle/opportunity situations do you see in your life now? Could this be God’s plan to position you, his daughter, to impact and save many?

“Silence is golden” – comes from an ancient, possibly Egyptian, proverb that more fully says “Speech is silver, silence is golden.” Perhaps you grew up in a home, as I did, where the saying was “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.” While there is wisdom in these sayings, these pithy quotes would not have helped Esther in her predicament. **(Esther 4:14 AMP) “For if you remain silent at this time, liberation and rescue will arise for the Jews from another place, and you and your father’s house will perish [since you did not help when you had the chance].”** Mordecai challenged Esther, because this was a crucial moment in time that she could not remain silent. Silence would have been the regret of her (shortened) life! Not only for herself, but for all of her people as well.

As a disciple of Jesus and with the Holy Spirit as your speech-instructor, God wants you to speak up. We are called to speak to one another as sisters (discipling) to help each other grow up into Christ **(Eph 4:15, 29; 2 Tim 4:2; 1 Thes 5:14)**. God wants to use you to speak up to share the Good News of Jesus to a divided and hurting world **(Mt 28:18-20, 2 Cor5: 19b-20)**.

Q: Is there a situation where you think God is calling you to speak up?

Q: Are you speaking up in a way that is loving yet confident? Humble yet faithful?

**(Esther 4:15-16)** Esther knew enough to realize she could not rely on herself. She needed to approach the king, which was against the law and a death sentence for everyone, man or woman **(Esther 4:11)**. She could not rely on her beauty, having just the right words, or if the King favored her this week or not. This was a situation BEYOND her. Esther need God-help not self-help.

Esther chose to fast (food and drink) for 3 days and 3 nights, and had her maids and the whole Jewish community fast with her to call on God to deliver. Esther relied on God and her faith community.

Q: *Imagine...*How do you suppose fasting and praying for 3 days helped Esther surrender to God's will to the point where she said "and if I perish, I perish"? (**Esther 4:16**)

Q: What is an area you have been relying on yourself to handle? Bring that issue before God – pray. Ask others to pray and fast with you to have victory in that area.

Day 5 / Chapter 5

## The Cup of Bitterness is Poison to the Soul

Irene Gifford - Portland, Maine

Time in History:

479 BC in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of King Xerxes' 20-year reign

Place:

Palace of Susa, Persia (modern day Iran)



### Study Scriptures and Questions:

1. Please read Chapter 5 and write a synopsis in a few sentences. What stood out to you in these verses?
2. Re-read verses 1-5. After fasting for three days and asking all the Jews to fast as well, Esther is ready to approach the king. What qualities do you see in her that you can imitate? Can you think of a time you had to step out on faith recently? How did God help you?

3. Requesting a banquet was unusual during this time in history. Kings and queens normally ate alone except for special feasts. Why do you think Esther invited Haman to join them? Have you ever entertained someone at your house that you did not agree with in some way? What was the outcome? Luke 7:36-47
4. Re-read Verses 6-8. Why do you think Esther did not make her request at the first banquet? Perhaps she was being led by the Spirit? Romans 8:26-27, or she might have been afraid and felt she needed more time, Mark 9:24 or perhaps she felt it was just the wisest thing to do. James 1:5, James 3:13.
5. Re-read verses 9-14. These verses focus on Haman and the hate in his heart towards Mordecai. Here is a man who seems to have everything. He is second in command to the king. What sins in his life cause him such unhappiness?
6. Compare Esther's response to Haman and the edict with Haman's response to Mordecai. What differences do you see? Let us think of our own lives. How does jealousy and pride have an impact on our relationships? Where in my life might I see bitterness rooting itself in my heart? Hebrews 12:14-15; Deuteronomy 29:18-19.
7. Esther comes with a humble heart to the king. Contrast this with Haman and his arrogance and pride. Why is he bitter? How is it like poison? Proverbs 19:11, Proverbs 16:5, 16:18.
8. How did Haman's wife Zeresh, influence his downfall? What lessons can I learn from her to put into practice in my marriage, with my family, or at my job?
9. What do you find most inspiring about Esther from this chapter? Can you think of how you can apply this to your life today? Think of three good things that have happened this week and thank God for his faithfulness.

### **Personal Reflections:**

What inspires me about Esther is her courage. She is bold and intentional. She decides to fast for three days and asks all the Jews to fast with her. She does not want to approach the king without God's help and guidance. This is an upward call for me. I can hold back and allow fear to control my actions. 2 Timothy 1:7 is a verse that helps me. When I fast for one day, I can feel like that is enough. I pray to become more like her. I like that she decides to invite them for a second banquet before revealing her request. I think she is listening to the Spirit saying the moment is not right. I think the Spirit really does give us a nudge to open our mouths or to remain silent.

What I need to remember about Haman is that I can be like him if I allow jealousy or discord to grow in my heart. In time, resentment and bitterness can take hold. Imagine if he had approached Mordecai and asked him why he did not bow down. Perhaps he would have come to understand the importance of Mordecai's faith in God. There have been times that I have misunderstood others and taken things personally. The truth did not come to light until we talked about it. If only I had not waited things could have been cleared up sooner. A verse that helps me is Proverbs 19:11. I will ask myself if I can overlook that offense? Perhaps that person is having a bad day. I do not know what is going on in their life. I need to not assume it

has anything to do with me. If I cannot do this, I need to ask them. Think of how many conflicts could be avoided if we were willing to inquire and seek to understand. If I do not inquire, avoidance and bitterness can develop.

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Dates taken from BibleArchaologyReport.com Title: Xerxes June 5, 2020

Picture from [biblestudytools.com](http://biblestudytools.com)

### Day 6 / Chapter 6

## **God Acts on Behalf of Those who Wait for Him**

Sue Shoff - Burlington, Vermont

From the very first sentence of Esther 6:1 one can almost hear the music changing...“That night the king had trouble sleeping so he ordered an attendant to bring the book of the history of his reign so he could read it to him.” Our invisible God, yet completely present Almighty King, allows King Xerxes to struggle with insomnia! Plot Twist! At the end of the fast that Esther requested for God’s people, God shows up and shows off! So often it truly is in the waiting room that God does his best surgery on our hearts. While we are in the waiting room God is working on our hearts to trust His timing. He is also working behind the curtain for his will to be done. Let’s read chapter 6 and glean some God sightings.

#### **Wonder Don’t Worry During the Wait**

Jesus reminds us in John 5:17 that “My Father is always at work and so am I”. When we can’t see God’s hand, we need to trust his character. God is in charge, He is King! Proverbs 21:1 “The king’s heart is like a stream of water directed by the Lord; he guides it wherever he pleases”. God moves to have the king read a history book of his recent reign. The king discovers the heroic actions of Mordecai instead of the monotonous story he knows so well. When things just don’t make sense or add up, we should contemplate “I wonder what God is up to now?”

#### **Always Pray and Wait in Expectation**

As the end of the 3 day fast is approaching God reveals his plan! Mordecai is concerned with what’s best for God’s people, while Haman is self-infatuated. God notices all of it. God reveals Mordecai’s actions to the king, and the king rewards him for all he has done. So often it can feel like God doesn’t notice what we’ve done for others or what we’ve sacrificed as his follower. As we wait we can think that all we have done is in vain. But that thought is a lie. Hebrews 6:10 is a reminder to us from God “ God is not unjust. He will not forget how hard you worked for him and how you have shown your love to him by caring for other believers, as you still do.” We can

follow David's example as in Psalm 5:1-3 " O Lord, hear me as I pray: pay attention to my groaning. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for I pray to no one but you. Listen to my voice in the morning, Lord. Each morning I bring my requests to you and wait expectantly."

### **Invisible Yet Present and Plotting**

God's fingerprints are all over this chapter as we watch Haman go home, humiliated and dejected. His prideful pompous plot failed and God's plot prevailed. The faith of Mordecai reminds us of Hebrews 11:24-27 as the writer describes Moses' faith as one who "persevered because he saw him who was invisible". God promises he will be with us always and working for our good.

### **Trust God's Timing in the Waiting Room**

As Chapter 6 concludes :14 "While they were still talking, the king's eunuchs arrived and quickly took Haman to the banquet Esther had prepared." We are reminded like Acts 17:24-28 that God creates the time and place in hopes that people will reach out for Him and will find him. We should trust his sovereignty and hold on to the Isaiah 40:31 promise about waiting on the Lord.. "Yet those who **wait** for the Lord

**Will renew their strength:**

**They will mount up with wings like eagles,**

**They will not run and get tired,**

**They will walk and not become weary.**

Day 7 / Chapter 7

## **Righteousness and Truth Will Always Prevail**

Lisa Sharma - Pioneer Valley

*7 So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet, <sup>2</sup> 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."*

*<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>[a]</sup>"*

*<sup>5</sup> King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?"*

*<sup>6</sup> Esther said, "An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!"*

*Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. <sup>7</sup> 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.*

*<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, "A pole reaching to a height of fifty cubits<sup>(a)</sup> 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!" <sup>10</sup> So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided.*

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"Life just goes from bad to worse! It has been one thing after another! I can't get a break!"

"Where is God? Does He know what I'm going through right now? Does He even care?"

After reading Esther chapters 1-6, we can easily imagine Esther saying all of these things. After all, she was orphaned, then torn from the father-figure who had raised her to become a forgotten and objectified member of a large harem. What thoughts must have entered Esther's mind when she heard the news that Haman was preparing to impale her adoptive father, Mordecai, on a 75 foot pole? And as if that pain were not enough, she had just found out that her entire race was slated for annihilation! Maybe she was angry at God. Maybe she doubted him or at least doubted his goodness. Where was God in Esther's suffering? God is conspicuously absent from the entire book that bears her name.

And yet....isn't that the point?

We all go through dark times, times when we feel that God is absent or doesn't see our pain. We wonder if He is there for us or if He will come through for us. We struggle to understand His plan when our dream, or even our life, feels like it's falling apart around us.

Sometimes this darkness can last for a long time, as it did for Esther. The many years of pain she experienced, included the days of anguish and anxiety as she faced the imminent death of everyone she knew and loved, must have felt unbearable at times. And yet the whole time, God was working behind the scenes to accomplish His will, working so that righteousness and truth would prevail. We are given a glimpse "behind the scenes" in chapter 6 as we see God working through the king's dream to reward Mordecai's righteousness. And we see truth triumph in a

way only God could orchestrate here in chapter 7 as Haman's true nature is revealed and he is killed on the same pole he had prepared for Mordecai.

In my own life, after nearly three decades as a disciple, I can look back at the darkest times and see the hand of God working good. I can see the way his righteousness and truth prevailed in the end, even though in those valleys, I couldn't see this at all.

- God used the persecution from my family that I endured as a young disciple to strengthen my faith and deepen my convictions. In the end, years of witnessing my life, my children, my friends, and the church family, helped my parents and my in-laws to distinguish truth from lies. Righteousness and truth prevailed.
- God used a time of grief after losing my first son at birth to draw me closer to him than ever before as I turned to him in my pain. **Psalm 34:18 says, "He is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."** Through that loss, God opened a door for us to lead a mission team to Albania, one of the greatest joys in our life. He was working His goodness in my life, behind the scenes, even when all I could see was sadness and loss.
- **John 1:4-5 – "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not understood it."** - This verse helps me to remember that God's light is always shining, even in our deepest darkness. We may not understand it, but it is there, nonetheless. Some Bible versions translate "understood" as "overcome". From this we can gather that, while God may seem far from us in our dark times, his light will always overcome the darkness in the end.
- Does it sometimes seem like God is silent in our suffering and absent in the darkness? Yes. Could Esther have known God was working on her behalf all the while as she suffered? No. But her story, with its silent, but oh-so-prominent portrayal of our God, who sees our pain and fights our battles in ways we may never know, is meant to give us faith - faith that His goodness, righteousness and truth will always prevail.

Day 8 / Chapter 8

## **Remain Steadfast on the Path Until Completion**

Anita Allen - Providence, RI

"It ain't over 'til it's over." Yogi Berra, manager of the New York Mets, is best known for coining this phrase during baseball's 1973 pennant race. His team was a long way behind when he said



it, but rallied to win the division title that year. Stories like these inspire us . . . and hopefully teach us something.

Sometimes things look bleak, and at other times things look promising - in sports, in school, in relationships, and in our spiritual walk or direction in life. Esther experienced both highs and lows in her life . . . and both can be found in Esther 8.

Esther 8 began with some good news for the Jews, as Esther received Haman's property and Mordecai received the king's signet ring. Following the evil Haman's death, things were looking up for the Jews.

Unfortunately, even though Haman was gone, his evil plan was still in effect. Esther had to once again find the courage to go back to the king and ask that Haman's plot be reversed. The king reminded Esther that once he sealed the official decree with his signet ring, it could not be changed.

Even though challenged, the king and Esther were able to come up with a solution. Esther would write up a new message and send it out to the people. This decree would give the Jews in every province and city the authority to unite and defend themselves and their families. This was cause for celebration for the Jewish people.

So, what can we take from this story?

First, we all have highs and lows (Ecclesiastes 7:14) This may not be news to anybody, but it is important to remember. We can feel that things should be better than they are . . . our finances, our character, our relationships, our church - really any circumstances . . . and you're probably right. That leads us to point #2.

Second, God can change what seems unchangeable. In our story, God reversed the irreversible. Can He do that today for you? What area of your life could use some changing?

Third, we can be joyful even before everything changes. The Jews celebrated in chapter 8 because Esther did not give up and they had hope again (spoiler alert - victory comes in chapter 9!). We are all works in progress. One of my favorite quotes is from Lysa Terkeurst, "We are imperfect because we are unfinished." Do you need more hope and joy? Remain steadfast on the path until completion and remind yourself, "It ain't over 'til it's over."

Day 9 / Chapter 9

## Redemption & Celebration!

Hannah Desouza - Boston

### 1) **Redemption** [*Read Esther 9:1-16*]

A recurring theme in the Bible is that of humility being rewarded and pride being confronted. Proverbs 29:23 says, “A man’s pride and sense of self-importance will bring him down, but he who has a humble spirit will obtain honor” (AMP). Nowhere, perhaps, is this theme played out so obviously as in the story of Esther!

At times there can be a tendency to glamorize Esther’s life, as a Cinderella story of rags-to-riches. Yet, the reality is, this was a young girl (some historians suggest a mere teenager!) that was familiar with grief and hardship: orphaned as a child, raised as a foreigner in a country and culture not her own, objectified by men and used for her beauty.

Yet this girl had not been forgotten by God. He lifted her up out of her lowly state and chose her for a noble purpose - and it was a calling she rose to! Esther showed her humility in her willingness to heed and obey her cousin Mordecai, counting her own life as nothing in the hope of rescuing her people. As Proverbs 29:23 says, “he who has a humble spirit will obtain honor” and we see Esther honored for her courage and selflessness both in her own time and in history! (Along with Ruth, Esther is the only other book in the Bible named after a woman. What a legacy!)

On the opposite end of the spectrum, we have seen Haman do nothing *but* chase his own honor and recognition throughout the book of Esther. He seems discontent with doing any deed if it is not seen, admired and applauded by people. The same Proverb states, “A man’s pride and sense of self-importance will bring him down” (29:23). We see this come to a head in a gory way in chapter 7 when Haman is impaled on the very pole he had set up for Mordecai’s death, in a cruel twist of fate. In chapter 9 this vindication is taken further when Esther requests that this same punishment be extended to Haman’s ten sons also (Esther 9:13). While we might criticize Esther for this violent request (a cherry on the top of an already gruesome chapter!), if we delve back into history we can catch a glimpse of a wider plan at work here.

Early on in the book of Esther we are told that Haman is an Agagite, that is a descendent of Agag, King of the Amalekites (Esther 3:1). If we recall our Old Testament history, we know that the Amalekites were age-old enemies of the people of Israel. God famously commands King

Saul to wipe out the entire nation in 1 Samuel 15 because of their wickedness. Yet, it was a command that Saul did not follow through with; instead deciding to spare King Agag (and possibly other members of his household too). This disobedience signals the beginning of the end of Saul's time as king. Knowing this it is remarkable, centuries later, to look back with hindsight and see the wisdom of God. Saul's seemingly small act of defiance almost led to the annihilation of the entire Jewish remnant in Persia at the hands of a future descendent of King Agag!

For all the ways mankind can err, disobey and deviate from the commands and plans of God, it is encouraging to remember that our God is a God of redemption. The story comes full circle when we see the Jewish people saved, not by Saul but by a future Benjamite, Queen Esther! (Intriguingly, like Saul, Esther and Moredacai are also of the tribe of Benjamin sharing Kish as a common ancestor). With the execution of Haman's sons, Esther finally puts an end to the line of Agag, and the wickedness and devastation that accompanied it. In this light, Esther might be said to finish what Saul could not! Her obedience and courage ensured the safety of the Jewish people and granted them relief from their enemies.

*Question: In Esther and Haman we see clearly how the lowly are brought high, and the high are brought low. In what ways do you think you have been trying to elevate yourself recently? What might it look like to entrust this area of your life to God and allow Him to lift you up?*

## 2) **Celebration!** [Read Esther 9:17-32]

We worship a God of redemption but also of *celebration*. After the Jewish people triumph over their enemies we see Mordecai send out letters to the Jews living in all 127 provinces of King Xerxes! What message did he have for them that was so important? To celebrate! "To celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar, as the days on which the Jews had rest from their enemies, as the month which was turned from sorrow to joy" (Esther 9:21). These instructions formed the basis of the joyous festival of Purim, still celebrated by Jews today.

Richard Foster concludes his great work on the spiritual disciplines with a chapter on 'The Discipline of Celebration'; in it he reminds us that "Celebration is at the heart of the way of Christ".<sup>1</sup> How true this is! The gospel is the good news that *we too* are liberated people! Freed from the condemnation of the enemy and the bondage of sin. As the ancient philosopher Augustine of Hippo wonderfully put it, "The Christian should be an alleluia from head to foot!".

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline* (2007)

And yet, how hard it is for our day-to-day life to be one of celebration?! Especially in our current climate. You need only take one scroll through your social media newsfeed to be flooded with a wave of bad news! It seems to be a feature of the human condition that fear and negativity typically come more naturally to us than joy and celebration. Why else would Foster classify celebration as a *discipline*? Or God have to *command* his people to celebrate? Ancient Israel was instructed to gather together three times a year to celebrate the goodness of God in various festivals. Clearly God knew the power in celebration and in consciously remembering the good that He has done.

Celebration brings joy and with it joy brings strength! As the prophet Ezra said, “the joy of the Lord is your strength!” (Nehemiah 8:10). The key phrase being ‘of the Lord’! While happiness can fluctuate as it is often circumstantial, joy is deep-rooted when it is found in God. Meaning that, even in the worst of circumstances, we always have cause for joy as disciples. It is why the Apostle Paul could write so confidently from a prison cell in Rome, “Rejoice *in the Lord always*. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4).

If you are following this quiet time plan in order, you should be reading this on March 9th. Serendipitously, in the New Living Translation the fifteenth day of Adar, set aside for joy and feasting in Purim, is translated as March 9th (see Esther 9:18 in the NLT for proof!) Take this as a sign to have a time of celebration today!

*Set a timer for 5 minutes, close your eyes and have a time of intentional remembrance and quiet celebration - a “Purim pause” if you like! Recall things that God has done in your life from as far back as you can remember - ways he has redeemed, healed, pruned and rescued you - and thank Him for it!*

## Day 10 / Chapter 10

# Working Towards Shalom

Lory Demshar - Boston

Read: Esther 10:1-3; Phil. 2:3-8; 2 Cor. 5:16-21

*“Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the **good** of his people and spoke up for the **welfare** of all the Jews.” Esther 10:3 NIV*

### **A Word about Words**

The word translated **welfare** in verse 3 is the Hebrew word “shalom.” Shalom overall means well-being (physical, spiritual, and emotional). When we look more closely we see the varied shades of meaning in this word. It means: completeness, soundness, welfare, well-being, safety, prosperity and peace. This peace refers to relationship, such as peace with God and others. Also it includes deep inner peace from God.

This is the welfare/ the “shalom” that we are to help others into.

### **The Story**

The story of Esther and Mordecai may seem to have a fairy tale ending, but these were real people in dire circumstances. They were in captivity away from their homeland and their routine of life changed. They lived among people of a different culture and language. There was no temple to go to which was central to their faith.

Esther’s parents died and in the course of her time in Susa she was forced to be a member of the king’s harem. Esther and Mordecai lived under threat of annihilation.

In all of this, Mordecai and Esther used this time and circumstance to do good and seek the physical and spiritual welfare of the people.

Let’s review instances where we see Mordecai and Esther sacrificing for the “shalom”/ welfare of others.

- Mordecai selflessly adopted Esther, after the death of her parents. (Esther 2:6-7)
- After Esther was taken to be a part of the King’s harem, Mordecai daily went to the palace court to check on the “shalom” of Esther. (Esther 2:11)
- Mordecai exposed a plot to assassinate the king. (Esther 2:22-23). Mordecai cared about the “shalom” of the king.
- Mordecai put on sack cloth and publicly proclaimed his grief at the royal decree to annihilate the Jews (Esther 4:1-3).
- Mordecai asked Esther to speak to the king on behalf of her people. Esther agreed to risk her life and speak to the king to deliver of her people (Esther 4:1-3; 15-17).
- Esther relied on God and asked the people to fast and pray on her behalf that the king would allow her to speak and grant her request to save her people (Esther 4:15-17). Esther worked for the good and the “shalom” of her people by uniting them to trust God and seek his help in this matter.

- Esther followed through on her intention and asked the king to deliver her people. God granted her success (Esther 8:3-8).

### **Captivity of the Pandemic**

In a sense we have been taken captive by this pandemic. We are out of our regular daily life routines. We may be feeling a lot of things right now: stressed, mourning the sickness or loss of loved ones, weary, distant from God, longing for face to face fellowship, fearful of the future.

As you reflect on the story of Esther and Mordecai, and the meaning of seeking shalom, consider these reflective questions:

- What is one thing that inspires you, and how can that strengthen you during these difficult times?
- Shalom means “welfare, well-being, safety, prosperity and peace.” Esther and Mordecai worked for the “shalom” of others out of the norm due to the enormity of the situation. What is one thing you could do to promote the “shalom” of others in excess of what you normally would do?
- The story of Esther turned out the way it did because of Esther’s reliance upon God for help. What is one extra action you could take to display to God your reliance on him (e.g. fasting, extended prayer time, praying regularly with another...).