

Esther: Rescuer of the Jews

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a six-part series

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Esther 4:5–17 (CEB)

⁵ Esther then sent for Hathach, one of the royal eunuchs whose job it was to wait on her. She ordered him to go to Mordecai and find out what was going on and why he was acting this way. ⁶ Hathach went out to Mordecai, to the city square in front of the King's Gate. ⁷ Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him. He spelled out the exact amount of silver that Haman promised to pay into the royal treasury. It was in exchange for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸ He also gave Hathach a copy of the law made public in Susa concerning the Jews' destruction so that Hathach could show it to Esther and report it to her. Through him Mordecai ordered her to go to the king to seek his kindness and his help for her people. ⁹ Hathach came back and told Esther what Mordecai had said.

¹⁰ In reply Esther ordered Hathach to tell Mordecai: ¹¹ "All the king's officials and the people in his provinces know that there's a single law in a case like this. Any man or woman who comes to the king in the inner courtyard without being called is to be put to death. Only the person to whom the king holds out the gold scepter may live. In my case, I haven't been called to come to the king for the past thirty days."

¹² When they told Mordecai Esther's words, ¹³ he had them respond to Esther: "Don't think for one minute that, unlike all the other Jews, you'll come out of this alive simply because you are in the palace. ¹⁴ In fact, if you don't speak up at this very important time, relief and rescue will appear for the Jews from another place, but you and your family will die. But who knows? Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be part of the royal family."

¹⁵ Esther sent back this word to Mordecai: ¹⁶ "Go, gather all the Jews who are in Susa and tell them to give up eating to help me be brave. They aren't to eat or drink anything for three whole days, and I myself will do the same, along with my female servants. Then, even though it's against the law, I will go to the king; and if I am to die, then die I will." ¹⁷ So Mordecai left where he was and did exactly what Esther had ordered him.

Boldness. In a world of men, one woman took the path of courage.

So far in this series, we've heard the stories of remarkable women whom God put to work for his purposes. Rahab, the Canaanite woman who paved the way for Joshua and the Israelites to take Jericho. Deborah, a judge and prophet of Israel, whose story was preserved not only in prose, but also in poetry. And Huldah, the prophet to whom King Josiah turned at the most critical moment in his long rule. Today, we turn to the story of Esther, a young Jewish woman who would rescue her own people from genocide.

The story of Esther

In 586 BC the Babylonian empire overran Jerusalem, destroyed Solomon's temple, and exiled thousands of Jews a thousand miles away to Babylon. About fifty years later, King Cyrus of Persia conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Jewish exiles to begin returning to Jerusalem, as many did over the next decades. But some did not. Some Jews remained in Persia and it is from this community that we learn the tale of Esther and Mordecai. Here is a summary of the lengthy tale (from Wikipedia of all places, with a few of my own edits).

"King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) held a 180-day feast in [Susa](#). While in 'high spirits' from the wine, he ordered his queen, [Vashti](#), to appear before him and his guests to display her beauty. But when the attendants delivered the king's command to Queen Vashti, she refused to come. Furious at her refusal to obey, the king asked his wise men what should be done. One of them said that all the women in the empire would hear that 'The King Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not.' Then these women would despise their husbands, which would cause many problems in the kingdom. Therefore it would be prudent to depose of Vashti.

Many beautiful maidens were then brought before the king in order that he might choose a successor to the unruly Vashti. The King chose Esther, an orphan daughter of a Benjaminite named Abihail. Esther was originally named Hadassah, meaning myrtle.

She had spent her life among the Jewish exiles in Persia, where she lived under the protection of her cousin [Mordecai](#). When [Cyrus](#) gave permission for the exiles to return unto Jerusalem, she stayed with Mordecai, who became chief minister of Ahasuerus and lived in the Persian capital of [Susa](#). One day, while sitting at the gate of the king's palace, Mordecai overheard a plot of two men to kill the king. Having informed the king through Esther of the conspiracy, Mordecai brought about the execution of the two conspirators, and the event was recorded in the royal chronicles.

The grand vizier [Haman](#) commanded Mordecai to do obeisance to him. Upon Mordecai's refusal to prostrate himself, Haman informed the king that the Jews were a useless and turbulent people and inclined to disloyalty, and he promised to pay 10,000 silver talents into the royal treasury for the permission to pillage and exterminate this alien race. The king then issued a proclamation ordering the confiscation of Jewish property and a general extermination of all the Jews within the empire.

Mordecai tore his robes and put ash on his head (signs of mourning or grieving) on hearing this news. Sheltered in the harem, Esther was unaware of the decree until Mordecai advised her of it through Hathach, one of the king's chamberlains. He informed her that she should not think that she would escape simply because she was in the palace. At the request of Esther, Mordecai instituted at Susa a general fast for three days.

Esther could not approach the king without being summoned, on pain of death, and the king had not summoned her in thirty days, implying that she may have fallen out of favor. Nevertheless, at the end of the three days, Esther dressed in her royal apparel and went before the king. When the king asked her what her request was, she invited the king and Haman come to a banquet she had prepared. At the banquet they accepted her invitation to dine with her again on the following day. Haman, carried away by the joy that this honour gave him, issued orders for the erection of a gallows on which he purposed to hang the hated Mordecai.

But that night the king, being sleepless, ordered the chronicles of the nation to be read to him. Recalling that Mordecai had never been rewarded for his service in revealing the plot of the eunuchs, he asked Haman, the next day, to suggest a suitable reward for one 'whom the king desired to honour'. Thinking it was himself that the king had in mind, Haman suggested the use of the king's apparel and insignia. These the king ordered to be bestowed on Mordecai.

Only at the second dinner party, when the king was sufficiently beguiled by her charms, did Esther reveal for the first time her identity as a Jew, and accused Haman of the plot to destroy her and her people. The king ordered that Haman should be hanged on the gallows prepared for Mordecai, and, confiscating his property, bestowed it upon the intended victim. The king then appointed Mordecai as his prime minister, and issued a decree authorizing the Jews to defend themselves."

God at work?

C.M. Bechtel tells a story about Deborah Lipstadt. After winning a major court battle against a Holocaust denier, Deborah went to her synagogue for the feast of Purim, at which she heard the entire book of Esther read. When she heard the words of Esther 4:14, "Who knows? Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be a part of the royal family," she reflected on her own recent experience. She later said, "I heard that and it made me think: Who knows if not for this very reason I got the education I got, I got the upbringing I got, my job – maybe we're all meant to do one something significant. And some of us do it on the public stage. And some do it by helping a child. Nobody knows of it, nobody sees it, but we're all meant to do something. And maybe this is the something I was meant to do."¹

What is that significant something for you? Was there something in your life that it seemed God had been preparing you all along? Perhaps you've discovered that something here at St. Andrew, as I have. For some of us, the most significant thing we might ever do is

¹from C.M. Bechtel's commentary on Esther in the *Interpretation Bible* commentary series. 2002.

wrapped up in our contribution to the creation and growth of this church. Perhaps God surprised you in this, as he surprised me. God certainly surprised Esther.

Surely God is at work in this rescue of the Jews. But how does God work? When? Where? Is there luck in the story? Coincidence? The story of Esther is a bit of a cautionary tale. The nature of God's work in the story is never stated. Indeed, this is the only book in the Bible in which God is never named! For this and a few other reasons, some Christians have never been sure what to make of Esther. Martin Luther wished that the book didn't exist at all! But like all the biblical books, it is there for a reason. One of them is to help us understand better how God works in this world.

Surely, God has been at work at St. Andrew over the last nearly thirty years. But how? When? Where? The ambiguity of God's work in the story of Esther reminds us that part of faith is trusting in God's work and God's purposes even when we can't be sure how or where or when God is working. I've been blessed to be on staff at St. Andrew for more than a decade and I'm confident that God is at work in and through this amazing community. Yet, in our day-to-day decision-making, God's will and work is often difficult to discern. We, clergy and lay alike, are not always sure what God would have us do. It is sometimes nearly impossible to be confident that we are listening to God's voice and not just hearing an echo of our own. Yet, choices must be made, plans set, and risks taken.

Called to boldness

The people of God are called to be bold, to be risk takers, to go forward doing our best to live out God's purposes and hopes, even when it is difficult to know how God is working in our lives. Esther had to be bold. She needed to go to the king but knew that anyone who approached him without being summoned was executed. Mordecai, Esther's father, had to push her a bit on this (4:12-14), but, in the end, Esther went to the king – and the people were saved. Was it God's will that the Jews be saved? Surely. But no angel and no prophet showed up to encourage Esther and Mordecai, they just had to trust and proceed.

Founding St. Andrew took boldness. Building the large sanctuary, starting the Well, providing medical services in Costa Rica, dramatically expanding the whole Seven Loaves family of ministries – all took boldness. There are always reasons to be cautious, to hold back. But that is not what God asks of us. It is in community that we grow our in our trust of God and one another so that, like Esther, we'll take the bold step forward. We worship together. We read and study Scripture together. We pray together. We sing together. We hurt together. We celebrate together. It is in this fellowship, to which God has called each of us, that we grow in our relationship with God. There simply is no healthy relationship with Jesus Christ without a relationship with his church.

Feasting and Fasting

At the end of Esther's story, the Jews are instructed to celebrate a festival to be called Purim, which means "lot," for the lots Haman throws to pick the date of the massacre.

Jews celebrate Purim each year in late February or early March and quite a festival it is. Purim is the most fun and festive of all the Jewish holidays. The centerpiece of the Purim festival is a public reading of Esther in its entirety. The people are to join in this reading by hooting and hollering as the reading proceeds. They are to boo, hiss, and stomp loudly each time Haman's name is mentioned. They use noisemakers, masks, costumes, and more in this communal celebration of the saving of the Jews. But before the carnival-like festival, Jews observe a fast, in keeping with the three-day fast undertaken by Esther and all the Jews before she went to the king (4:16).

The Purim feast celebrates the saving of Persian Jews from Haman's planned massacre. One can't read this story without contemplating all the Purims without the miracle of Purim – when Jewish massacres, pogroms, and holocausts were not averted. "Purim is not a denial of those haunting realities," writes Timothy Beal. "Nor is it a denial of the profoundly real and pressing question, 'Where is God in all this?'" Rather, in the face of these hard questions, the Jews "persist in celebrating, playing, and having laugh-out loud fun with Esther."

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Esther 1 & 2 Vashti sparks a crisis and Esther is made queen.	Tuesday, Esther 3 & 4 Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman, leading to potential genocide; Esther says she will help.
Wednesday, Esther 5 & 6 Haman plots against Mordecai, but his plan backfires.	Thursday, Esther 7 & 8 Esther pleads for her people – twice.
Friday, Esther 9 & 10 The Jews defend themselves and the Feast of Purim is established.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Matthew's Gospel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying the book of Acts

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series:

Biblical stories that will make you feel better about your own family!

Information Meeting: Fall 2016 Israel Trip with Scott Engle and Arthur Jones

Sunday, August 30 at 6:30 in Piro Hall

We are planning a ten-day trip to Israel, similar to the Fall 2014 trip. If you've ever thought about taking an in-depth tour of Israel, this is the trip to take. Visit Nazareth, Capernaum, the Sea of Galilee, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, Masada, and much more with friends and family. This trip is life-changing. Your faith will be deepened, you will never read the Bible the same way, and you will have a great time. We hope that you will join us!

Information on the trip can be found at
www.scottengle.org.

Space is limited and we plan to have most of the group
put together no later than October 1.