

THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

Chapter 20: The Queen of Beauty and Courage

Key Question: What are ways God works invisibly to accomplish his purpose?

A Royal Decree

Pages 275–277

Zerubbabel finished building the second temple in Jerusalem in 516 BC, and the Jews who returned to their home continued building their lives in the Persian province of Judah. Most Jews remained in the places to which they'd been exiled, however, including the family of a man named Mordecai.

About thirty years later in a magnificent palace in Susa,²⁵⁵ the ruler of the Persian empire, King Xerxes, demonstrated the glory of his possessions and position before his nobles for six months. At the end of the time, he gave a week-long banquet.

1. (a) In what mood was King Xerxes on the final day of the banquet (Esther 1:10)? (b) What did he wish to display to the people (1:11)? (c) How did the king feel about Vashti's refusal²⁵⁶ (1:12)?

Enraged, Xerxes asked his highest legal experts how he should punish Vashti.

2. (a) What did the king's advisor seem most concerned about regarding Vashti's conduct (Esther 1:16–18)? (b) What did he recommend be done to her (1:19)? (c) What did the advisor say would be the outcome of the royal decree he recommended (1:20)?

²⁵⁵ Susa was east of Babylon and above the Persian Gulf in modern day Iran.

²⁵⁶ The author doesn't give us Vashti's reason. Some suggest to display her beauty would mean appearing unveiled, which she may have considered inappropriate. Some Jewish commentators say Vashti was to appear naked, wearing *only* her crown, though the book of Esther does not specify that. If Vashti was another name for Queen Amestris, she may have been pregnant, for her son Artaxerxes was born about this time. In any case, she may have thought parading her beauty before inebriated men shameful.

3. (a) How did the king’s attendants propose he find a new queen (Esther 2:2–4)? (b) How did the king feel about the proposal (2:4)? (c) Did the king consider the dreams and desires of the girls or their families? (d) Did he consider the feelings of the men who may have been courting the girls? (e) What have you learned about Xerxes so far?

Lives Changed

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King Xerxes sent commissioners throughout the kingdom to find beautiful girls for his harem so he could pick a new queen from among them. They found Mordecai’s cousin, Hadassah, who also went by a local name, Esther.

4. (a) What happened to change Esther’s life (Esther 2:5–10)? (b) What have you learned about Esther so far? (c) What might have been some reasons Mordecai forbade Esther to reveal she was Jewish (2:10)?

Esther was now in the king’s harem and would soon be one of his many concubines, having a status lower than a wife. Yet she had a chance to be elevated to a queen.

5. (a) How might Esther have felt about this drastic change in life? (b) Have you ever had an unexpected life-changing event? If so, describe your feelings at the time.

6. What happened to Esther (Esther 2:15–17)?

7. (a) Meanwhile, what happened to Mordecai (Esther 2:21–23)? (b) What have you learned about Mordecai’s character so far?

Lives Imperiled

Pages 279–282

Once again the Jews faced enemies.

8. What happened that endangered all the Jews’ lives²⁵⁷ (Esther 3)?

²⁵⁷ The author does not tell us why Mordecai refused to kneel before Haman. Mordecai was a Benjamite and Haman an Amalekite, so the long-standing animosities between the people groups may have played a part (see 1 Samuel 15 and lesson ten). Religious scruples probably played a part too: “Although the Israelites used the custom of bowing down to superiors ... the Persians saw it as an act of reverence that bordered on recognizing the official as divine.” Mervin Breneman, *New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1993), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 325-326.

Mordecai heard about the king’s edict and fasted. When Esther heard that he lay in sackcloth and ashes, she sent attendants to find out why. He explained and instructed Esther to beg the king for mercy for the Jews.

9. (a) Why did Esther initially balk at Mordecai’s instructions (Esther 4:8–14)? (b) What did Mordecai believe would ultimately happen for the Jews (4:14a)? (c) What did Mordecai tell Esther about the possible purpose for her being in her current position (4:14b)? (d) Describe a situation where you eventually discovered God’s purpose for you being there.

10. (a) How did Esther show courage (Esther 4:15–16 and elsewhere)? (b) If possible, briefly describe a time you decided to do what was right despite potential terrible consequences.

Esther called for all the Jews to fast with her for three days, humbling themselves by denying their bodies’ physical need for food to concentrate on their spiritual need for God through prayer.²⁵⁸

Circumstances Reversed

Pages 282–285

The king’s wives and concubines were supposed to wait for the king to call for them. Esther couldn’t do that, though. So she put on her royal robes and stood in the king’s court, even though so doing carried the death penalty. She risked her life, not knowing if he would react angrily, as he had when Vashti disobeyed him, or favorably, not counting her approach as an affront.

She waited. The king held out his gold scepter and spared her life.

²⁵⁸ That they fasted assumes prayer.

Xerxes asked Esther what she wanted, fully aware it must be important. But she didn't just blurt out her request. They hadn't been together for some time, so she asked him to come to a banquet with Haman. There they could reconnect and she could ask for her people's lives without distractions.

11. (a) How was serving a banquet a way to look out for the king's needs before asking about her own needs? (b) When you want to ask someone for something, what are ways you can address their needs first?

12. What happened at the banquet (Esther 5:6–8)?

Esther apparently sensed the time wasn't right. She delayed her request a day and invited the king to another banquet.

13. (a) Briefly describe a situation in which you delayed requesting something because you realized the time wasn't right. (b) What are some things that can alert us that it's not a good time to ask for something?

Haman left the banquet happy, until he noticed Mordecai showed no fear in his presence. Furious, he erected a pole on which to impale Mordecai the next day.

But that night, everything began to change for God was working behind the scenes.

14. (a) What happened that night (Esther 6:1–2)? (b) What do you think was the cause of the king’s sleeplessness and interest in his chronicles?

15. How were Mordecai’s and Haman’s circumstances reversed (Esther 6–7)?

More Reversals

Pages 285–289

Haman was dead, but there was still the problem of the king’s irrevocable edict that the Jews’ enemies kill them.

16. How were the Jews’ and their enemies’ circumstances reversed (Esther 8–9)?

17. (a) List some ways God worked invisibly in the book of Esther. (b) What does this tell us about how God works in our lives?

18. Telling our stories of God’s hand in our lives encourages others to trust God. Describe a situation in which God worked behind the scenes to accomplish something in your life.

Timeline: Esther (500–430 BC)

