

CHAPTER 20, THE QUEEN OF BEAUTY AND COURAGE

TIMELESS TRUTH: GOD'S PROVIDENCE INCLUDES BOTH JUSTICE AND LOVE.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

King Xerxes of Persia had reason to party. His vast empire was powerful and prosperous. His queen was lovely. His palace was ideal for a celebration befitting such a monarch. His merrymaking continued for six months when Xerxes summoned Queen Vashti so he could put her on display for the inebriated revelers. She refused. Kings do not like to be refused. With his advisers' support, he stripped Vashti of her crown and banished her from his presence.

Kings also do not like to be queenless. The king commissioned a kingdom-wide beauty pageant and young women from every province were whisked into the king's harem for a year-long visit at the royal spa. One such woman was a Jewish girl named Esther who had been raised by her cousin, Mordecai. Esther won everyone's heart, including the king's. He made her queen but did not know she was a Jew. Soon after, Mordecai learned of a plot to kill the king. He passed the news to Esther; the king was rescued and the conspirators hanged. Xerxes' scribe recorded Mordecai's service in the annals of the king.

Haman was King Xerxes' right-hand man. Haman reveled in his high standing and enjoyed having all the royal officials kneel at his feet. Mordecai refused to pay such homage. Haman was enraged. To exact his revenge, Haman deceived the king into issuing a decree to exterminate Mordecai and his people, the entire Jewish population of Persia. He cast a lot, or pur, and chose a single day of unfettered violence against the Jews.

Mordecai sent word to Esther asking her to beg the king for mercy. Queen Esther feared for her life because no one could legally go before the king without prior permission. Mordecai's immortal words persuaded her: "*Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?*" Her courageous response was, "*If I perish, I perish.*"

She and the Jews in Susa fasted, and Esther approached the king. Xerxes welcomed her and offered to grant her heart's desire. She invited the king and Haman to a private banquet. Haman was delighted. Esther invited them both to another fancy but ultimately fatal feast. Haman was elated to be the exclusive royal guest but still enraged over Mordecai's insolence. With all the satisfaction of a Cheshire cat, he erected a pole on which Mordecai could be impaled.

Kings with full stomachs must not sleep well, so Xerxes spent the midnight hours reading the royal records. He discovered the account of Mordecai's report that saved his own life and wondered how he might honor such a man. The king asked Haman for advice on how he might honor one of his favorites. Assuming that *he* was the king's favored, Haman dreamed up an elaborate ceremony. Within moments, a mortified Haman was giving his nemesis the king's robes, leading him through the streets and singing his praises. Haman later enjoyed the queen's second banquet until Esther exposed his plot to destroy her people. The king left the room in a fury only to return and discover Haman appearing to assault his queen. He ordered that Haman be impaled on the very pole intended for Mordecai.

The king could not repeal his original edict declaring the destruction of the Jews. But he enabled Mordecai to issue a counter-edict providing for the Jews to take up their own defense. The day planned for destruction became a day of deliverance. Though the lot was cast, God remains the author of the story. Even in exile, God protected His people, and in Esther, we see God's heart for saving us all.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What's the biggest, most lavish party you have attended?

1. Analyze the positives and negatives of King Xerxes as a leader.
2. The book of Esther has been called the “godless book” because God’s name is never mentioned. Prayer, the Law, sacrifices, and temple worship are also conspicuously absent. Where can you find God’s supernatural blessings in the story anyway?
3. Look up Isaiah 48:20 and Jeremiah 29:10, 50:8, 51:6. What do these verses say about the Jews like Mordecai and Esther who stayed behind? What do you learn about God through His providential care of the Jews outside of the Promised Land?
4. The book of Esther is full of irony, such as Queen Vashti who would not come before the king when requested and Queen Esther who came before the king when not requested. What other examples of irony can you find in this chapter?
5. What life lessons does Haman teach us about pride, self-centeredness, and hatred?
6. Review the correspondence between Mordecai and Esther concerning an appeal to the king (p. 281-282). What is the relationship between God’s providence and our responsibility?
7. What risk was Queen Esther taking by approaching the king and how did she prepare for it (p. 282-283)? What factors do you suppose could account for Esther finding favor in the eyes of the king?
8. Queen Esther was willing to risk her life to save her people. Can you share a time when you took a risk to do what was right?
9. Esther is not the first Hebrew that God positioned in a place of influence to be a source of deliverance for His people. Who are the other deliverers we have studied in The Story and what common threads connect Queen Esther’s story to theirs?
10. How does the Lower Story of Esther fit into the covenant that God made with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3)? How does it fit with God’s Upper Story of redemption?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 21, REBUILDING THE WALLS

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Ezra “devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel” (p. 292). How has your own devotion to the study of God’s word changed since the beginning of *The Story*?
2. Review Ezra’s praise prayer (p. 294). Compare it to Proverbs 21:1. How might this help inform your view of our country’s newest government leaders?

DAY 2

1. Why did Nehemiah and Zerubbabel respond differently to opposition? (Review p. 264-266.) How are you most likely to respond when you face opposition?
2. Compare Nehemiah’s self-defense (p. 296-298) with Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:38-45. How do you reconcile the differences?
3. What characteristics make Nehemiah a good leader? Which characteristic do you most need in your life?

DAY 3

1. Nehemiah chose Hananiah as a co-leader of Jerusalem “Because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do” (p. 300). How would you benefit from surrounding yourself with “Hananiahs?”
2. Compare Malachi’s message on marriage with 1 Peter 3:7. Of what is marital unfaithfulness a symptom? What warnings might you give to a friend who treats a spouse poorly?