

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP

Esther, Queen of Persia

The last of the seventeen historical books in the Old Testament, the Book of Esther, records the remarkable story of an orphan girl who became the Queen of Persia. King Xerxes, the ruler of an empire that stretched from India through the Middle East to Northern Africa, was the most powerful figure in the world at that time. He ruled an empire that he had inherited from his father, King Darius, for twenty years (486-465 B.C.). The wealth of Xerxes stood in sharp contrast to the poverty of the Jews, who were deported from their homeland and were exiles among other defeated peoples living in the Fertile Crescent.

❖ **The Character of Esther**

Esther's beauty surpassed that of all the other young virgins in King Xerxes' empire. But while her remarkable beauty was the reason she was chosen to become the new queen of the autocratic king, the Bible notes the character and personal strength of Esther. She was an orphan whose parents had apparently died when many Jews were exiled to Babylon by King Nebuchnezzar in the fifth century B.C. Her uncle, Mordecai, raised her as his own daughter and she developed a great respect and love for him. Although Mordecai was a Jew, he became a civil servant in the Persian Empire and had a position of responsibility in Susa, the winter residence of Persian kings.

As the story unfolds, Esther's loyalty to Mordecai, her respect for authority, and her courage stand out. The central drama of her story revolves around the efforts of Haman, King Xerxes' ambitious Prime Minister, to liquidate the Jews because of his hatred for Mordecai, who refused to bow before Haman. Mordecai's refusal to bow before the Prime Minister reminds us of Daniel, who had refused to bow down before the emperor's statue thirty years earlier.

When confronted with Haman's evil plans to exterminate the Jews, a plan he shrewdly got King Xerxes to support, Mordecai approached Queen Esther, asking her to intercede with the king on behalf of their fellow Jews. At this point in the story, King Xerxes had no idea his beautiful queen was a Jew, since her identity was concealed from him. To approach the king without an invitation, Esther had to risk her life.

The leadership of Esther was evident in the fact that when she was put in a position to be used by God, she was willing to risk her life for her people. She viewed her high position as a privileged one and was ready to serve God when called upon. Because of her courage, the Jews were saved and the evil Haman was hung on the same gallows he had built for his enemy Mordecai.

❖ A Powerful Lesson from Esther's Life

The most dramatic point in this story, in my judgment, occurs when Mordecai asks Esther to block Haman's "ethnic cleansing" efforts. With remarkable boldness, Mordecai tells Esther: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 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 royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4: 13-14).

Mordecai's remarkable confidence in God's sovereignty is clear. He believed God would honor His promises to deliver the Jews and, if Esther decided not to be the one to intervene with King Xerxes, the Lord would frustrate Haman's plan some other way. Mordecai trusted God, yet, at the same time, was not fatalistic. Here the difficult tension between divine sovereignty and individual responsibility seemed to clash. Mordecai believed in God's power, yet called on his adopted daughter to be the agent of God's will. He badly wanted her to step up to this challenge, but knew that if she did not, the Jews would be protected in another way.

Esther showed remarkable courage in using her high position to be the leader God intended her to be. She knew what had to be done, risked her life in the process, and bravely acted on her convictions. Did she feel trapped, when presented with the story of Haman's scheme? Did she act out of a sense of duty or respect for Mordecai? We do not know why Esther did what she did. We only know that she was courageous and was used by God to preserve her people from extinction.

Trusting in God, despite the crises we face, does not mean that we should become fatalistic or develop a posture of inactivity. "Waiting for God to do something" is often an excuse for inaction or irresponsibility. Trusting in God and doing what they knew was right characterizes the lives of both Mordecai and Esther. That's an important leadership lesson for us.

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