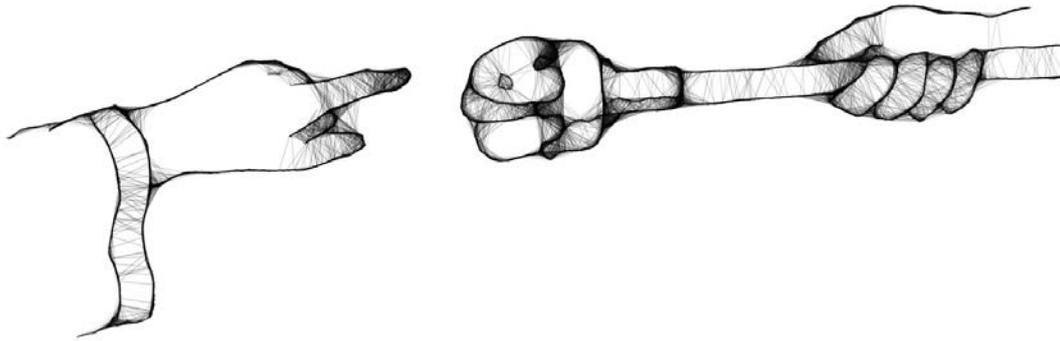


Esther and Mordecai



SABBATH—AUGUST 1

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Esther 1–10; 1 Corinthians 9:19–23; John 4:1–26; Acts 17:26; Matthew 22:21; Romans 1:18–20.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘What if you don’t [do not] say anything at this time? Then help for the Jews will come from another place. But you and your family will die. Who knows? It’s [it is] possible that you became queen for a time just like this’ ” (Esther 4:14, NlrV).

ESTHER WAS USED TO CARRY OUT A HIGH-LEVEL MISSION WITHIN THE DANGEROUS POLITICAL HEART OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE. Her mission involved her experiencing many different things. Esther was an orphaned female member of a hated race and religious group, living in the superpower (Persia) of her day. She also became the wife of the Persian king. This was no rags-to-riches fairy tale. Rather, Esther was lifted from an unknown background and trained to carry out a very special mission. It required that she hide the fact that she was Jewish. Later she had to make a dangerous confession of her background and faith.

Esther dared to witness at the Persian court. Her work and courage saved her people.

No doubt as a result of Esther’s faithfulness, knowledge of the true God became more well-known among the Persians. The story of Esther and Mordecai is not your “usual” missionary story. But their story does give some interesting principles (important rules) to follow that can help us to understand what it means to witness in difficult places and situations.

ESTHER IN PERSIA (Esther 1:2–20)



But Vashti refused to come show them her beauty.

Read Esther 1:2–20. What is happening here? What things about this story are hard to understand from our modern viewpoint today? (As you read, keep in mind that a lot of details are not given.)

The weeklong banquet that King Ahasuerus gave for his nobles and officials seems too much, even for someone at the top of political power. The unlimited drinking of alcohol (Esther 1:7, 8) was unusual, even for those times. Drinking during formal feasts in King Ahasuerus's day was usually controlled by social rules. In this case, alcohol clouded the king's judgment to the point that he ordered his wife Vashti to come out and to put on a "show" for the king's drunken, all-male gathering. This was way below her honor as a married woman and as a member of the royal family. No matter how Vashti answered, she faced the risk of losing her rank as queen. But she made the courageous choice to keep her honor. This choice helps the reader to understand the power for good that a principled (law-abiding) woman could give.

But, meanwhile, we have to deal with the actions of Esther. Esther 2:3 gives the impression that these women were not volunteers. The king gave the order, and Esther had to come. Had she refused, who knows what would have happened?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. In what ways can the principles in these verses help us to understand what happened with Esther? How can they help us as we face difficult situations today?

So far in the story the real heroine is Vashti, who then disappears from history. Her purity and her decision to live her life based on principles opened the way for Esther. But in some cases, principled stands can result in persecution and trials. In the end, why should we take principled stands, even if we do not know what will happen as a result?

ESTHER IN THE COURT OF THE KING (Esther 2:10, 20)

Read Esther 2:10, 20. What situations might arise where we should hide our nationality or religious beliefs, at least for a short time?

Read the story of Jesus and the woman at the well in John 4:1–26. Why did Jesus tell her so openly that He was the Messiah (Chosen One), when He kept this from His own people? How does this story help us to understand Mordecai's words to Esther?

Twice Mordecai warns Esther not to tell anyone her nationality and family background. This has troubled some Bible thinkers, who have questioned the need for this secret. Could Esther not have been a witness about her God to these pagans (worshippers of false gods) if she were open about who she was and the God she worshiped? Or could it be argued that to be a Jew meant not having enough authority at the Persian court? No doubt this was the truth. More than likely, if Esther had revealed her background, it would have prevented her from reaching the king when she pleaded for her people. But it appears that even before the threat happened, Mordecai had warned Esther not to tell anyone her background. The fact is that the Bible does not tell us the reason for Mordecai's words to her. But as we can learn from the example of Jesus, one does not have to tell everything at once in every situation. Being careful is always a wise path.

Meanwhile, why did Jesus speak so openly to the woman at the well and not to His own people?

“Christ was far more careful when He spoke to the Jews. Christ also encouraged His disciples to keep who He really was a secret. But He shared this secret with the Samaritan woman. Jesus saw that she would make use of her knowledge in bringing others to share His grace [mercy; forgiveness].”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 190.

Have you ever been in a situation in which you decided that it would be wise not to say too much about your faith or your beliefs? What reasons did you have? As you look back now, what might you have done differently, if anything?



Twice Mordecai warns Esther to tell no one she is Jewish.

“FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS” (Esther 2:19–5:8)

In Esther 3:1–5, Mordecai, a Jew—following the commandment against worshiping false gods and idols—refuses to bow down to Haman, a mere man. Furious, Haman tries to find a way to avenge himself. Mordecai, by his actions, is witnessing among these pagans about the true God.



Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, a mere man.

What excuse does Haman use to try to rid the empire of the Jews? What does this tell us about how easy it is to let cultural differences blind us to the fact that all people are members of the human race? Read Esther 3:8–13 and Acts 17:26.

As Haman’s evil plan is made known, Mordecai shows his grief very clearly. Mordecai uses one of the Jewish religious rituals mentioned in the book of Esther: “He [tears] his clothes. . . . He [sits] down in ashes. . . . He [cries] bitter tears” (Esther 4:1, Nlrv). In the meantime, Esther prepares to go before the king. She would become a Jewish breaker of royal Persian law by heroically entering the king’s presence without an invitation. It is her part of a plan to spoil Haman’s plot to kill the Jews. Thankfully, the king admits her and accepts her invitation to dine. Esther now takes the lead in the drama faced by the Jewish exiles across all of Persia. In this story, Esther shows unselfishness and heroism (Esther 4:16), tact (polite words and actions) (Esther 5:8), and courage (Esther 7:6).

“Through Esther the queen, the Lord rescued His people. At a time when it seemed that no power could save them, Esther and the women associated with her, by fasting and prayer and prompt action, met the issue, and brought salvation to their people.

“A study of women’s work in connection with the cause of God in Old Testament times will teach us lessons that will help us to meet emergencies in the work today. We may not be brought into such a terrible place as were the people of God in the time of Esther. But often converted [saved; godly] women can act an important part in more humble places.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 3, page 1140.

Read Esther 4:14, Mordecai’s famous words to Esther: “ ‘Who knows? It’s [it is] possible that you became queen for a time just like this’ ” (Nlrv). In what ways might you be able to use the principle behind these words right now?

MORDECAI AND HAMAN (Esther 6:1–3)

According to Esther 5–8, how was Esther able to save her people?

The verses that tell us about Esther’s two banquets bring us to the most important moment in the story. They tell of the great rescue of the Jews from the planned wipe-out of Haman. On the way, the story reveals the difference between true honor and self-honor. It also records the punishment of the villain (Haman). These court plans had far-reaching effects. They give us understanding into the behind-the-scenes workings of a powerful king and his court. Esther and Mordecai used their positions, their knowledge of the culture, and their faith in God’s covenant¹ promises to His people to bring about the rescue and freedom of the Jews.

Meanwhile, despite his quiet life of service, Mordecai let his faith be known. He refused to bow down before Haman. People noticed, and they warned him. But he refused to compromise his faith (Esther 3:3–5). His stand, surely, was a witness to others.

Read Esther 6:1–3. What does this tell us about Mordecai? What lessons could we learn about how God’s people can work, even witness, in foreign lands?

Mordecai clearly was following the Lord. But he was loyal to the king of the nation in which he lived. While refusing to bow before a man, he still was a good citizen. In that, he exposed the plot against the king. We should not wonder too much about the fact that Mordecai had not been honored for this act. Very possibly he did it and then just went on his way, not expecting any reward. But in time, Mordecai’s good deed was more than rewarded. His example here is perhaps best revealed by these words: “ ‘Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. And give to God what belongs to God’ ” (Matthew 22:21, NIV). And then, as the Bible promises, God who sees everything will honor those who honor Him (1 Samuel 2:30) as He sees fit and in His own time.



Esther uses her power and beauty to help save her people.

DEFINITIONS

1. covenant—having to do with the agreement and promise between God and His people.

**WHEN SOME GENTILES (NON-JEWS) BECAME JEWS
(Esther 8:17)**

Read Esther 8. Look at verse 17. What do these verses teach us about outreach and witness?

No question, the book of Esther is not a usual story about outreach and witness. As a result of the king's order for the Jews' sake, "many people from other nations announced that they had become Jews. That's [that is] because they were so afraid of the Jews" (Esther 8:17, Nlrv). Some Bible thinkers argue that theirs could not have been a true conversion experience, since fear and anxiety should have no place in accepting new faith. While that is true, who knows in the long run how these people might have accepted the working of the Holy Spirit, especially after understanding great differences between their beliefs and the belief and worship of the one true God?

Read Romans 1:18–20. How might the ideas taught here work with these people, especially in this story?

In the original laws against the Jews, the Jews were to be killed. And the ones who would kill them were told to "take the goods that belonged to the Jews" (Esther 3:13, Nlrv). Later, when the Jews were given permission to kill their enemies, they, too, were told that they could "take the goods" that belonged to their enemies (Esther 8:11, Nlrv). But three times in the book of Esther (Esther 9:10, 15, 16, NKJV) it says that the Jews did not "take the goods" (Nlrv). The verses do not say why. But the fact that it was mentioned three times shows the importance that was placed on this refusal. Most likely the Jews refused to steal because they wanted it known that they were acting out of self-defense and not greed.

How can we make sure that in our outreach and witness to others we do not do anything that would cause people to question our reasons? Why is this so important?

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, “In the Days of Queen Esther,” *Prophets [Special Messengers] and Kings*, pages 598–606.

“The law that will finally go forth against the remnant [all that is left of the faithful] people of God will be a lot like the law ordered by King Ahasuerus against the Jews. Today the enemies of the true church see in the small group keeping the Sabbath commandment a ‘Mordecai at the gate.’ The respect of God’s people for His law is a continuing reminder to those who have cast off the fear of the Lord and are dishonoring His Sabbath.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets [Special Messengers] and Kings*, page 605.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① What comparison can we make between the king’s order that was brought against the Jews and what will happen in the last days when the “mark of the beast” comes to the forefront?

② Both Jews and Christians have argued about whether the book of Esther should have a place in the Old Testament Bible. It did not appear in the Old Testament used by the community that produced the Dead Sea scrolls, nor in the Old Testament of the churches of ancient Turkey and Syria. The name of God does not appear in the book of Esther at all, while King Ahasuerus is mentioned about one hundred ninety times! There are no examples of sacrifice, temple, or worship, but prayer and fasting are mentioned. Finally, covenant teachings about forgiveness and mercy are not mentioned. But the Lord saw fit to include this book in the canon.² Why? What powerful spiritual lesson can we learn from it about how God can work in our lives for good, even amid what appear to be very difficult times?

③ Think more about the times during which missionaries and others doing outreach might not openly talk about who they are and their work. What are some good reasons (if any) for us to do that while doing mission work? Sometimes, for example, missionaries are very careful not to say who they are, especially in countries that are hostile to Christian witness. If we are impressed not to tell right away who we are, how can we keep who we are a secret without being dishonest?

DEFINITIONS

2. canon—a list of Bible books accepted as sacred (holy).