

## **With Great Privilege, Comes Great Responsibility**

Esther 2:16-8:16

### **Slide 1**

Did you read through Esther this week? If so, did you grasp one important fact. Esther is the only book in the Bible not to mention the name of God.

That's not to say that God was absent. His presence permeates the story, as though He were behind the scenes coordinating coincidences and circumstances to make His will happen.

Also, there's a Jewish holiday called Purim, which celebrates Esther even today, and she has the distinct honor of being one, of only two women in the entire Bible, who has a book that bears her name.

Now, let me give you just a little historical background. As was the case last week, we're at a point in Israel's history when division reigns.

Israel has been divided into two kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom for quite a while by now.

The Northern Kingdom has been conquered by the Assyrians, and where we are this morning, the Southern Kingdom has been conquered, too.

In fact, the Southern Kingdom was conquered twice; first, by the Babylonians, then later, by the Medes and Persians.

The result of these conquests is that the people were ripped from their homeland and scattered about the vast Persian empire.

You have to understand that a key to survival in a foreign and hostile place is to "lay low" and not "rock the boat," so to speak.

That's how the Jewish people lived during their exile. They did their best to assimilate into the culture around them, while at the same time tried to remain faithful to the one true God.

## **Slide 2**

Esther's story began with a special banquet that King Xerxes gave for all his supporters which lasted for seven days.

Needless to say, seven days of drinking can cause a person to do stupid things and this is exactly what happened to King Xerxes.

*He ordered his servants, "to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger." (Esther 1:11-12)*

Did you hear that, the king was upset because his wife refused to be showed off like a prize heifer. And his advisors didn't help. In fact, they goaded him into action.

So, after bad advice from his advisors, he decided that his wife, Queen Vashti, was a bit too rebellious and should be replaced.

He needed a new Queen; one who would be more submissive. So it was that this king, in a little corner of the Persian Empire, decided to have a beauty contest to pick his next wife.

The King's beauty pageant served its purpose. A young woman named Esther was chosen to become the next Queen.

*Esther 2:17, "Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti."*

Esther had been orphaned as a young child and had grown up in the home of her cousin, Mordecai.

The way the story is written, I believe that Esther wouldn't have been selected as a candidate if her heritage and background were known.

Regardless, the King was so enraptured with Esther's beauty that he didn't bother to ask about those pesky details.

Yet, there was more to Esther than just good looks. It's fair to say that Esther possessed a certain "inner beauty."

Because, even by all measures of physical beauty, eventually one turns to something that is beyond measure: the person.

Esther had such unique qualities that she "*won the favor of everyone who saw her.*" The king loved Esther more than all the other women that were brought before him.

But the King's court wasn't a place of complete beauty and love.

### **Slide 3**

Within the court, there was an evil man named Haman. If any story ever had a wicked villain, this was him.

His sole focus in life was to gain more power for himself and he was doing this by slowly moving up the ranks within the king's court.

Things were going his way and he loved it. In fact, the king had ordered that everyone pay Haman special honor by bowing when he passed.

So, as he made his way to the royal palace each day, the citizens would bow when he passed, except for one; a man by the name of Mordecai.

The same Mordecai who raised the young woman that now sat on the Queen's throne.

Knowing that Mordecai was favored by the king, the royal officials were jealous. Looking for a way to get rid of him, they asked Haman if he knew that Mordecai didn't bow.

Now, Haman probably didn't notice who bowed and who didn't, since he was too good to look at the people as he rode to the palace. He just assumed that everyone did.

*Esther 3:5, "When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged."*

Upset over Mordecai, Haman did some research and found that the reason he wouldn't bow was that he was Jewish, and the Jewish people only bowed in worship to the one true God.

Well, Haman decided that no honor would satisfy him as long as this Jew continued to ignore him. But that wasn't the only reason.

Haman was a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites; ancient enemies of God's people.

That why, when Haman learned that Mordecai was a Jew, he thought, why kill one Jew when he can destroy them all.

*Esther 3:6, "Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes."*

So, he persuaded King Xerxes to sign a document that would allow, on a particular day, the complete destruction of this relatively small, insignificant immigrant group.

To choose the specific day, Haman cast the lot, called “pur,” to determine the day that the Jews would be exterminated.

Even at this point, King Xerxes didn’t know that his fair Esther was a Jew, nor did Esther know that the king had signed this edict against her people.

Now, when a king in Persia issued an edict it became law. It denoted something which couldn’t be rescinded, not even by the king himself. This was known as the law of the Medes and Persians.

Haman understood this and believed he had created the perfect plan.

#### **Slide 4**

Well, word got around, as it always does, and Mordecai learned of Haman’s plan.

He gets a message to Esther telling her that she must speak with the king and persuade him to stop the massacre.

Now, Esther knew she couldn’t see the king without him first requesting her, regardless if she was the Queen or not. But Mordecai was very persuasive.

*Esther 4:12-14, “When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: “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 your royal position for such a time as this?”*

Well, when the man who raised you, talks to you like that, you listen, and draw up your strength, because you can't say, "No."

So, Esther goes to work; she begins to fast and pray, and sends word to all the Jews that they should do the same.

*Esther 3:15-16, "Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."*

Esther was the only person who could do what needed to be done. She had won a place of great privilege, and now, with that position came great responsibility.

So, after three days, she enters the king's presence knowing that the entire fate of her people rested squarely on her shoulders.

We can be sure that Esther was mortally afraid of the task before her. But two things stand out about how Esther responded to this challenge.

First, she put her concern for the lives of her own people above any concern for her own life.

In other words, she was willing to make a sacrifice of her own life if that was necessary to save the lives of her people. Esther 4:16b, "*And if I perish, I perish.*"

Secondly, she turned to God for the support she needed to carry forward. That's why the time of fasting and prayer was so important; Esther knew she needed God with her if this plan had any chance of working.

Fortunately, the king was pleased to see Esther and he invites her into his presence.

He asks Esther what she'd like and promises to give her whatever she desires. Esther tells the king she wants him to come to a celebration feast along with Haman.

So, he goes, and again he inquires of Esther what she desires, along with another promise to give her anything.

*Esther 5:6, "As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, "Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."*

Well, Esther didn't want half the kingdom. She told the king that she desired her own life and the life of her people.

She wanted him to rescind the order that had gone out to kill all the Jews. We might expect the king to get angry at Esther for being rebellious, but his response is quite the opposite.

He willingly grants Esther her desire, giving her permission to write whatever she wanted on behalf of her people, and that's exactly what she and Mordecai did, and then the king signed off on it.

*Esther 8:8, "Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring—for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked."*

And just like that, the Jewish people were saved.

Because Haman cast the lot, called "pur," to determine the day that the Jews would be exterminated, the feast of Purim, is still celebrated by Jews today, commemorating the Jews' deliverance from Haman's plot.

## Slide 5

### Conclusion

I'd like to tell you that there's some profound lesson here, but I don't think it's that complicated.

Esther's story reminds us of the obvious. We have an obligation to one another. Our lives are no more and no less valuable than the lives of any other person.

When we are in a position to help someone else, we have an obligation to follow through on that.

Did you hear the story, a while back, about a man in New York who dangled off a fire escape in order to save a person who was sitting in the window of his burning apartment with nowhere to go?

That's what we must be willing to do. When we see someone else in danger; whether physical, emotional, spiritual, or otherwise, we must be willing to step out on a limb to save that person, even if it means risking our own well-being.

That's what Esther did for the Jewish people, and it's exactly what Christ did for us. Each of us are called to "take up our cross" and follow Christ.

We're privileged to count ourselves among those who are saved by Christ.

But with great privilege comes great responsibility, and that's the responsibility to bring others into a life-saving relationship with Christ as well.

And here's the thing; if it seems too tough, all we have to do is lean upon God, through whom all things are possible.