

For Such a Time as This

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 20-22

Has this ever happened to you? Something happens to you or someone you know, and it seems somewhat amazing, then you wonder how it could happen. As you start to think about recent events you can see how, through seemingly random happenings, you arrived at that moment. That is the story of Queen Esther. Here is a brief recap of her story that brings us to today's Scriptures.

We start with the Babylonian exile of the Jews. When King Cyrus overthrew the Babylonian empire, he allowed all the exiles to return to their home countries, even helping to rebuild them. But not everyone returned to their homeland. Many people chose to stay in Persia, which is why we find Jews living in Susa, a pagan city, in the time of Cyrus' grandson, Xerxes.

Being a bit of a show-off, King Xerxes threw a lavish party for all his nobles. For seven days the finest food was served, and the best wine flowed freely. While all the menfolk were enjoying the king's party, Mrs. King – Queen Vashti - was entertaining all the wives at a lavish party of her own in another part of the palace. On the seventh day of the festivities, King Xerxes, now full of wine, got the idea to show off his wife the queen, who was known as an exceptionally attractive woman. He sent messengers to the queen saying to fix herself up and present

herself before the king and his nobles. Doing the unthinkable, the queen replied – NO. Wow!

Not knowing how to respond to this turn of events, the king asked his counselors what he should do. Their advice was to depose the queen, so other wives would not be emboldened to choose to follow her lead and challenge their husbands. King Xerxes did as he was advised, but in time came to miss having a beautiful queen. So, then the counselors advised the king to find a new beautiful young woman to be the new queen of the kingdom. With that a kingdom-wide beauty pageant was begun.

Among the beautiful young women gathered from the kingdom to appear before the king was Esther. Known as Hadassah to her uncle Mordecai, a Jew serving in the king's court, she was brought to the harem for a year-long beauty treatment before appearing before King Xerxes. Finding favor with the eunuch in charge of the harem, Esther was given special attention and moved to the best place in the harem. Uncle Mordecai had instructed Esther not to reveal that she was a Jew. To help keep her identity a secret, Mordecai only communicated with her from a distance.

After the year of preparation, Esther was finally presented to the king who favored her over all the other women vying for the title and made

her his queen. Again, the king held a great feast to celebrate his new queen.

Not long after Esther was made queen, Mordecai had occasion to overhear a plot to assassinate the king. He sent word to Esther about the plot, and she relayed the message to the king, citing Mordecai as the source of the information. The would-be assassins were apprehended and killed.

A short time after the failed assassination plot, King Xerxes elevated a nobleman named Haman above all the other nobles in the kingdom. The king had commanded that Haman be shown respect by having others bow before him. Mordecai, the Jew, refused to bow before Haman, which infuriated him. Upon learning that Mordecai was a Jew, Haman determined to eliminate all the Jews from the kingdom, so great was his anger. Having access to the king's ear, Haman persuaded the king to make an edict that on a certain day, determined by the casting of lots, that *all* of a certain people group in his realm be eliminated. Haman even offered the king 10,000 talents of silver to author the decree. The king declined the offer of blood money but gave Haman his signate ring to seal the destruction of these unnamed people. By casting of lots, called pur, it was determined that this extermination would take place 11 months from the date of the edict.

Mordecai, learning of the king's edict, tore his clothing and sat in ashes mourning the destruction ordered for his people. Esther asked her servants to find out what was troubling Mordecai, who refused the new clothing she sent for him. Sending a copy of the edict with Esther's eunuch, Mordecai warned that even she, queen of the realm, would not be spared from the destruction planned for her people. He encouraged her to appear before the king to appeal for her people's safety, telling her that perhaps it was for such a time as this that she had come to this position.

Knowing that to appear before the king unbidden could result in her own death, Esther asked that Mordecai would have all the Jews in the capital city of Susa fast for three days while she and her handmaids did the same. On the third day she appeared before the king, who welcomed her before his throne and offered her up to half his kingdom if she so desired. Being cautious and cunning, she invited the king *and* Haman to a banquet in her quarters that evening. When asked that evening what her request of the king was, she simply asked that both the king and Haman join her again the following evening. Haman, feeling very full of himself, rushed home to tell his wife and friends of his very special honor of being the only person other than the king to be invited to a banquet by the queen, not just once but twice. Yet on his way home, he once again passed Mordecai who refused to bow in his presence.

Sharing his pique with his wife and friends, they suggested he build a

gallows on which to impale the offender Mordecai, after gaining the king's permission. So, up went the gallows, tall enough to be seen over the city walls.

As luck would have it, that evening the king had difficulty sleeping, and not having cable news to watch, asked that the chronicles of his reign be brought in and read to him. The attendant read the story of the assassination plot that had been foiled by Mordecai. Asking what had been done to honor Mordecai, the answer was that he had not been recognized in any way. In the morning, the king consulted with Haman about how to honor someone in whom the king was delighted. Haman, thinking that of course the king was referring to him, suggested a ride around town on one of the king's own horses with the royal seal displayed on its head, wearing a robe the king himself had worn, and let the one leading the horse proclaim, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'" Imagine Haman's dismay and shame to find that the person HE would lead through the city streets was none other than Mordecai.

Things would only get worse for Haman when he attended the second banquet with the queen. When prompted by the king to share her request, she made her formal plea to the king to save not only herself but her whole people. (Remember she had kept her heritage a secret and the king had signed a decree without knowing who exactly he was agreeing to eliminate!) The aggrieved king demanded to know who would

mastermind such a heinous plan, and with pointed finger Esther said, “An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!”

With that Haman’s fate, and the fate of his entire family was sealed. The gallows meant for Mordecai would grow heavy with the bodies of Haman and his ten sons. Mordecai was elevated to the position formerly held by Haman, and the Jews were saved from destruction by a young Jewish woman in a pagan court.

This is an interesting story and one that has been debated for centuries. Is the story of Esther about real people? It might be. Is it just an allegorical story? Possibly. And why would a book of the Bible not include one mention of God or the coming Messiah? Hmmmmmm. Maybe this is one of those stories where we are encouraged to read between the lines. Much of what happens appears to be simple happenstance. But is it really?

Why, of all the women in the kingdom of King Xerxes, would a Jewish orphan girl be elevated to the position of queen? Of all the people sitting in the city gates, why was Mordecai the one to learn of the assassination plot *and* have access to the highest reaches of the court? Why would Esther request a three day fast before appearing before the king? How did it happen that the gallows meant for Mordecai would be used on the one who was his sworn enemy? It just seems like there are a lot of coincidences happening here. Or are there?

From the Biblical record we are aware that God often works in subtle, behind-the-scenes, kinds of ways: quail flying into a desert camp, Rahab the harlot saving the Israelite spies, Balaam's talking donkey, Jael – a woman with a tent peg – who defeated the enemy army's leader. I'm sure you can think of some other stories where God is present, even if not center stage. Mordecai, a faithful Jew, would likely have remembered the story of Daniel and his three friends, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar. All four stood up to edicts of the king and were delivered by the Lord God in miraculous ways. With that knowledge, he knew that to bow before a man, especially a pagan man, was not what God would want him to do. Esther's request for all the Jews in Susa and her handmaids to spend days in fasting, would recall the practice of the Jews to combine prayers of confession and supplication to God with their fasts. God's people had been delivered in the past in response to their prayers of supplication. Esther had every reason to anticipate deliverance once again for her people.

Can you think of a time in your life when unexpected circumstances played out to a happy ending? We usually are not aware of God's hand in the day-to-day occurrences of our lives, but when we are able to look back, we can see places where improbable, even impossible, things have happened. These could only be acts of God.

There is a lot going on in our world today: devastating wars in the Middle East, devastating natural disasters on our own shores. Many are asking “where is God in all of this?” You may be in circumstances right now that have you questioning “Why?” or “How?” Could it be that you, like Esther, are in these circumstances “for such a time as this”? Could God be acting in your life in ways you cannot yet comprehend?

Look at your situation and see where God has been present, ask where he might be leading you, or who he wants you to be. You might not be saving an entire race, like Esther, but you could be making a significant impact in someone’s life or the lives of several someone’s by your words, your actions, or your prayers. Don’t be afraid to ask God if you are where you are today “for such a time as this!” You may be surprised by his answer.

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10/13/24

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