

THE STORY

FINDING YOUR STORY IN GOD'S STORY.

Synopsis & Context – Session 20: The Queen of Beauty and Courage

King Xerxes of Persia had reason to celebrate. His vast empire was powerful and prosperous. His house, kingdom and queen were beautiful. His merrymaking continued for six months when Xerxes summoned Queen Vashti so he could put her on display for the inebriated revelers. But she refused. Not a good idea. With his advisers' support, he stripped Vashti of her crown and banished her from his presence. And you thought all royal drama was with *The Tudors*?

Almost immediately, the King sets to fill the void left by Vashti. The king commissioned a kingdom-wide 'search' and young women from every province were whisked into the king's harem for a year-long visit. 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 Israelite. 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' C.O. Haman reveled in his high standing and enjoyed having all the royal officials kneel at his feet; but Mordecai, being a steadfast in his faith 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 – not even the Queen. 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 tall gallows on which Mordecai could be hanged.

Kings with full stomachs must not sleep so 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 hanged on the very scaffold 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, working through the faithful.



Chapter 20: *The Queen of Beauty and Courage* is 'woven' from selections from *the Book of Esther*

Esther 1—9

Plot Points for Chapter 20: The Queen of Beauty and Courage

While Esther and Mordecai are God's key players, it is God himself who stands out as the sovereign hero in this story. In Esther's example, we see that God calls his people fearlessly to risk all for what is right. In Haman's demise, we see a perfect illustration of an eternal truth: pride goes before a fall.

Curiously, the story of Esther never explicitly references God. How strange for a book in the Bible! And yet, though God is never referenced we see evidence of his presence, power, and protection everywhere in this fast-paced novella.

The theme of God's sovereignty shines through in the arrangement of events. Because Queen Vashti was deposed, Esther was raised up. And because Esther was raised up, she was in a position to save her people. The Lord was clearly arranging events for a purpose.

We also see that God uses people to accomplish his purpose. Although he can directly alter history, as he had done in past events in Israel's history, God also changes the course of history through the choices and actions of people. Mordecai, Esther's older cousin, cared for her, raised her and advised her. When the time was critical, he exhorted her to be courageous. Esther could see what needed to happen to save her people, but she had to be brave to make it happen!

God's justice is clearly on display as well. Haman is the archetypal villain: proud, diabolical, and ruthless. In the end, he is impaled on his own stake. Justice is served.

Most importantly, we see that God is preserving his people. While he brings punishment and suffering in response to Israel's disobedience, the Lord does not allow any power to annihilate them. There are still promises waiting to be fulfilled. In particular, the Lord has promised Abraham that one of his descendants will bring blessing to all nations.

Cf. Barr, Adam Exploring the Story: A Reference Companion (Story, The). Zondervan.

God's Story – YOUR story!

- **Esther is story that does not overtly mention God, not does it stress any of the typical subjects (and controversy) of proper worship. So what in your mind keeps this story a book of faith?**
- **What life lessons / faith lessons do you feel Esther stresses (or elicits)?**
- **What makes this book an essential scene of *The Story*?**
- **Is there anything here that draws you to reflect on Lent?**