

Title: Steel

Passage: Esther 3:15-4:16

Date: 12 Nov 2022

Speaker: Jason Hoet

Series: Willing Servants

[slide]

The Book of Esther describes events that took place when Israel was in captivity in Babylon and Persia. It describes what happened to those Jews who were not a part of the remnant returning with Zerubbabel to Judah in 536 B.C.

At this time in history Xerxes, the son of Darius I, was on the throne of Persia. He ruled the empire from 485 B.C. until his assassination at the hands of his vizier in 465 B.C. Esther's story opens in the third year of Xerxes' reign.

Xerxes was a king of IMMENSE powers. In fact, at this time in history no ruler on earth was as powerful. His kingdom was divided into 127 provinces that extended from Turkey all the way down to Africa and into parts of Northern India and he ruled this vast empire from his capitol city of Susa (modern Iran)

Around 479BC Xerxes was looking for a new queen. Things hadn't been going right for him. Lost a war with Greece. Few bad decisions such as sleeping with his brother's wife. And he was starting to miss his Vashti, his queen he had divorced because she embarrassed him.

It seems his personal attendants noticed he is a bit sad and advised that he find a new queen.

These attendants were clearly high testosterone young men as their number one criteria for a queen was not wisdom or poise or maturity or even lineage. No, [slide]

2:2 "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king.."

They suggested girls be chosen from each of the 127 provinces, get all the usual treatments and the young woman who pleased the king the most would become queen instead of Vashti. The King thinks this is a "great idea".

One of the girls drafted into this beauty contest was a young Jewish girl by the name of Esther.

As a little girl Esther's father and mother died and

she was adopted and raised by her cousin Mordecai.

While other girls were brought to the citadel, Esther was taken, forcibly possibly as she belonged to the King. As slaves of war the Jews were property of the King. Esther would have been around 15 years of age, a virgin and not yet married. It seems as well that the Jews were under threat as Mordecai forbid her to reveal her nationality and family background.

Esther made it past the prelims into the final round of this contest but before Esther and the other finalists went before the king they underwent some very impressive beauty treatments.

Let me do a quick survey of the single females present. How long do you take to get ready for a date? I mean including bathing, hair, make-up, wardrobe selection....45 minutes? An hour? Anyone spend more time getting ready for the date than you spend on the date itself?

Look at the prep time Esther went through! [slide]

2:12 says, "Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics."

An entire year!

After this prep time each girl went before the king and he made his choice. Let's not be prudish - this was no normal beauty contest - it wasn't just about good looks and conversation. These young girls left the Virgin's Quarters, spent a night with Xerxes and returned to the Concubines Quarters. "young woman pleased him" And Xerxes chose: ESTHER.

v17 "He loved Esther more than the other women."

Oh he loved other women...but Esther was his favourite! So "he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti."

Cousin Mordecai kept watching over Esther and got a job at the Kings Gate. One day while he was at work he overheard two of the kings' officers conspiring to assassinate Xerxes. Mordecai told Esther - who in turn reported it to Xerxes, giving

credit to Mordecai.

2:23 "And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two...were hanged on a gallows. All this was recorded in the Book of the Annals in the presence of the king." [about gallows?]

For some reason the king honoured an evil man by the name of Haman, an Agagite, and made him the Prime Minister.

[When Jews tell this story they get all the children to hiss/stamp their feet when they hear Haman's name...]

3:2 "All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him but Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour."

Not quite sure why Mordecai wouldn't bow.

Probably it was because he was a Jew and to bow down to anyone or anything other than God was against God's law.

Word of Mordecai's behaviour got back to Haman and he was mad. But instead of punishing just Mordecai he hatched a plot to destroy all of Mordecai's people...all the Jews in the Empire. Extreme!

At the beginning of every new year the King cast lots...called "PUR" to see which day of the year would be his lucky day. When the lots were cast and they fell on the 13th day of the 12th month of the year. And we read in 3:8- 9 Haman unleashing his plan and saying to the king: [slide]

3:8- 9 "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people...and who do not obey the king's laws. It is not in the kings' best interest to tolerate them...so let a decree be issued to destroy them and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business."

If you really want to be lucky on this day the lots have selected, then, there's only one thing to do....get rid of these Jews! [slide]

10 So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. 11 "Keep the money," the king

said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please."

Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

Esther was secluded in the palace and unaware of what had happened so Mordecai got word to her and asked her to intercede with the king. She sent a message back to Mordecai:

[slide]

4:11 "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

Here is the climax of the story. Esther had good reason to fear approaching the king. For Anyone to infringe upon the king's privacy uninvited was like treason. Some writers say to enforce this law a squad of men armed with axes stood about the throne ready to hack the unbidden guests down unless the king in his mercy extended the golden scepter to restrain them. Esther's anxiety was not misplaced. And...the king had not summoned Esther for 30 days so she may have wondered how much influence she'd have.

On Esther's hesitation. Mordecai sent back this answer: [slide]

4:13 "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?"

Mordecai bluntly points out that rescue and deliverance will come. He is sure of it. But if Esther remains silent, she will not be part of it.

“And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

[slide]

Ever think about this phrase: all that has happened to Esther prior to this point. Life as Jewish slave, taken from her home, placed into palace life, owned by a pagan powerful king for his pleasure, subject to his mercy...

“who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” There are so many sad & terrible things. With such courage Esther and Mordecai do not dwell on their sadness, but instead see an opportunity for the freedom of others.

Esther is more than stunning beauty. Xerxes chose looks but he got steel as well - a woman who wasn't afraid to fight for what was right.

[slide]

15 Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: 16 “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.”

Until this point, Esther has been passive. She has done what she was told at every turn. Now it's her turn - Esther Acts: Gather the Jews for a three day fast...I'm going in!

Armed with courage, she put on her royal robes and went to the king - to his inner court-and waited for Xerxes to see her. What went through her mind..as she waited. Will the king accept me? Is it going to be life or death? Will I get hacked up?...[insert ad break] [slide]

[no slides]

Well, the king saw her and mercifully reached out his scepter. She would live...

5:3 Xerxes says "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given to you even to the half of my kingdom."

Which is "king talk" for, "What do you want? I'm in a good mood today." If Esther would have said, "Okay, I'll take the northern half of your kingdom," I am sure his mood would have changed!...this is more on the level of "Would you

like to choose the Netflix movie tonight?"

Esther knew this wasn't the time to blurt out "I'd like to have you revoke the unalterable law of the Medes and the Persians and execute Haman your Prime minister ...please."

Instead, she wisely said, "I'm hosting a banquet...and I'd like for you and Haman to come." He agreed and the banquet went great. The king had a great time and as he was drinking and feeling good he again said to his queen,

"What is your petition, it shall be granted to you. Even to half of my kingdom." And here again Esther showed her shrewd wisdom.

5:7 "This is my petition and request: if I have won the king's favor and if it pleases the king to GRANT my petition and fulfill my request."

In other words, if you want to say YES to what I have to ask you...

"...then let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and then I will do as the king has said." In other words, "Tomorrow...at the next party, I'll tell you what it is that I want."

Esther has skilfully manoeuvred the king to pretty much agreed to her request before he even heard it - amazing boldness and wisdom on her part. This girl is shrewd! Her beauty was more than skin deep!

Haman also enjoyed that FIRST banquet & on the way home people were bowing to him right and left but he encountered Mordecai who refused to bow and that just ruined his day...

So when he got home he moped about the house and told his wife: "I've got all this going for me. I'm #2 in power in the kingdom. I'm tremendously wealthy...I've just come from a private banquet with the king and queen and they've invited me back tomorrow night but all this does me no good as long as I see that Dog Jew, Mordecai, sitting at the king's gate." His wife suggested that he would feel better if he built a gallows and had Mordecai impaled on it. That brightened his mood.

He instructed the workers to build one 25m high pole for just that purpose. They got to work and worked all night on the project.

That night the king couldn't sleep (probably because of all the hammering and sawing going on over at Haman's house!) So he woke his servants and ordered them to read to him. And they selected a sleep-inducing book: The Annals of the King! And "for some reason" they read the chapter that told of the time Mordecai saved the king from assassination. Xerxes asked if Mordecai had ever been honored for this brave act and they said "NO," so he had to do something. Otherwise, it would be a blot on his honour. By this time, it was early in the morning and the king asked, "Who is in the court?"

Haman was there bright and early, whistling & chirpy, ready & eager to ask permission to impale Mordecai on the pole he had set up for him. Haman was brought in and the king said to him, "I need to pick your brain about something Haman. What shall be done for the man to whom the king wishes to honour?" (Esther 6:6)

Haman thinks to himself, "Who would the king wish to honour more than me? Of course he must mean me. I better make this really good."

Haman said to the king, "If you really want to honour 'someone' then let him wear one of your robes and crowns and sit on one of your horses and have someone parade him through the streets saying this is how 'someone' whom the king honours is treated." And the king said, "That is a great idea! I like it because I want to honour... MORDECAI! And Haman, you can be the one to parade him through the streets!" Imagine Haman's humiliation!

That night kicked off Esther's second banquet and Haman probably just picked at his food after a day of being forced to honour his sworn enemy. But at least the king had a good time and once again he said,

"Okay, you've been fattening me up long enough Esther. What's your request? Even half the kingdom...."

(Xerxes was not a real original guy-same line every time...)

Esther reclining on the couch, with amazing wisdom and boldness, informed the king that she and her people were about to be destroyed. The king said, "What? By whom?!" Here again she showed her daring & intestinal fortitude because she didn't even pause. She stared directly at Haman and launched with, "An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!"

[Hiss/stamp feet here...]

The king got up in rage and stomped out onto the balcony and Haman threw himself on the couch where Esther was. He laid there and begged for her mercy. The king back walked in and saw him on the couch with her and said, "will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house"

At this point the eunuchs covered his face. Haman was a goner. One of king's eunuchs steps forward and said, "Hey Xerxes, there's a 25m pole outside that Haman made for Mordecai." And the king said, "Impale him on it!"

Haman's estate is given to Queen Esther,

Mordecai takes Haman's place as #2 leader in the kingdom and while the law allowing the Jews to be killed could not be over-turned Xerxes consented to another law giving them the right to defend themselves. And they did. No Jews were even hurt when the 13th day of the 12th month rolled around! And to this day Jews, (And Iranians it turns out) celebrate this event in a festival in February or March which they call PURIM, based on the Persian word for "lots" which you should remember is "PUR."

[And the audience can now applaud]

Observations

From this great story of Esther's life there are two observations I want to finish with this morning:

God is not mentioned even once in this book.

In many ways the events described in the Book of Esther occur in a world that is like our world today. Unlike the rest of the Bible, where God is overtly performing miracles and wonders, in Esther's era He seemed to have disappeared. The Jews had been thoroughly conquered, their Temple destroyed, and their people scattered in exile. Prophets seemed silent. Worse of all, the Persian Empire had issued a decree to annihilate the Jews. It appeared God had deserted His

people, if not the entire world. It appeared that God was in hiding.

Rabbi Shmuley has said "It would be possible to read Esther and fail to notice God's involvement in the story."

Did you see God's involvement in the story? Has God deserted his people?

It would be possible for Esther to 'read' her own life and fail to notice God's involvement in her story.

- An orphan, in exile, slave, abducted, persecuted, embedded in politics and intrigue, left to make her own decisions...

But she does not.

She responds to Mordecai's challenge for such a time as this, she calls a fast to appeal to God. God may be hidden but he is not absent nor is he powerless.

God is playing a major role, even though His name fails to appear in the cast of characters, and He has no lines!

As Chuck Swindoll puts it [slide] **"Even when God is invisible, he is always invincible"**

- Esther is chosen as queen over all the other 126 beautiful candidates,
- Mordecai discovers the plot to kill the king
- the casting of lots for the day to kill the Jews resulting in a LATE date in the year, which gave Mordecai and Esther time to act
- Mordecai's conviction that the Jews would be rescued
- Esther's call to fast
- King's acceptance of Esther in throne room
- King's granting of the requests
- Kings' insomnia that brought to light Mordecai's deed of kindness

Even though God is Hidden, Esther Acts

After her 3 day fast: Esther Acts.

- She doesn't put out a fleece
- She has no divine voice or burning bush
- She needs no more signs than the ones she has:
- We have called on God, there is need, I have opportunity, I will go.
- If I perish, I perish

This is simple, practical faith.

"I am in this situation, I must be God's person".
And it rescues the world!

Esther - This is a woman who despite her background has stunning confidence, courage, selflessness. drop dead gorgeous and made of high tensile toughened steel.

Reflections

What have you learnt from Esther? [give moment]

Here are some of my own reflections

You can be like Esther.

- Not in the sense that you can be a nobody that becomes a Royal somebody and changes History. (although who knows...)
- But that your sadness or struggle or loss or pain can serve God's opportunity of freedom for others
- You can seek and plead with God to change our world
- You can proceed with faith and courage and do what you know to be right, regardless.
- You can know that you are God's person for whatever comes your way

You can know relief and deliverance will arise...that even when God is invisible, he is always invincible.

Response/Prayer/Care cards