

THE STORY

CHAPTER 20

Summary of Chapter:

King Xerxes reigned over the Persian Empire from one of its four capitals – the citadel of Susa. During his third year as King he threw a banquet celebrating the splendour of his empire, for all those who lived in the citadel of Susa.

On the last day he ordered that Queen Vashti parade her beauty in front of the king and his nobles, wearing her crown, however she refused to do so. This angered King Xerxes and he ordered that Queen Vashti would never again enter the presence of the king and her position would be given to another.

So a search for beautiful young virgins began for the king in all the provinces of the Persian Empire. They would be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, and they would have beauty treatments until the king was ready for them to enter his presence, for him to choose whether they would be Vashti's replacement.

Mordecai, who was one of the Israelites who had been carried from Jerusalem off into captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar, now lived in the citadel of Susa. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, who was also known as Esther and she was a beautiful young lady. Mordecai had looked after Esther since her parents had died.

When the king's order went out, Esther was placed in the care of Hegai and she soon won favour in his eyes. He assigned to her special food and beauty treatments along with seven female servants. He also moved her to the best place in the harem. Esther had not revealed her nationality or background because Mordecai had told her not to.

When it was Esther's turn to go to the king, the king was attracted to her more than any other women and she won favour and approval from the king more than any of the other virgins. So the King made Esther his queen, but Esther continued to follow the instructions from Mordecai and she still did not reveal her nationality and background.

Mordecai, who sat at the king's gate regularly, overheard two of the king's officials planning to assassinate the king. He told Esther and Esther told the king and when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were impaled on poles.

Haman, a noble in the king's court was an Agagite, who were ancient enemies of the Jewish people. Haman was honoured by the king, receiving a seat of honour higher than all the other nobles in the king's court. All the royal officials at the king's gate paid honour to Haman except Mordecai. When Haman heard of this and found out what nationality Mordecai was, he looked for a way of not only destroying Mordecai, but all his people, the Jews, throughout the Kingdom of Xerxes.

Haman was able to get the king's signet ring and issued a decree that could not be changed, that all the Jews in the Persian Empire were to be killed on a certain day. When Mordecai learned of this, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city and cried loudly and bitterly.

When Esther heard about Mordecai, she sent word to find out what Mordecai was so upset about. Mordecai responded by telling her all that had been decreed and asked Esther to speak with the king. Esther replied that no one was allowed into the King's court unless they were summoned by the king or they would be put to death unless the king extends his sceptre to them and spares their life. Esther also told Mordecai that she had not been summoned by the king for the last 30 days.

Mordecai responded by telling Esther that she should not think that she would be spared from this decree, but rather that God had raised her to this position for such a time as this.

Esther asked Mordecai to tell all the Jews to fast and pray for her and then she entered the king's court. The king was delighted to see Queen Esther and she was able to touch the king's sceptre and her life was spared. The King invited Esther to give him her request and said to her that he would give her anything, up to half of his kingdom.

Esther invited the King and Haman to a banquet that she would hold for them and she would then ask the king for her request. During this time Haman became more upset with Mordecai and his wife and friends suggested that he ask the king to have a pole erected where on Mordecai could be impaled. He agreed and went to the banquet delighted with this suggestion.

During the night the king could not sleep, so he read from the annals of his reign. He read about Mordecai's exposure of the officials who were trying to assassinate him and decided to honour Mordecai for this. He then asked Haman, how one who honours the king should be honoured, and Haman, thinking that he was the one the King wanted to honour, told the king how this person should be honoured. The King liked his suggestion and ordered Haman to do all of it for Mordecai. This increased the hatred Haman had for Mordecai and the Jews.

At the banquet, Esther told the King her request. It was for him to spare her life and the lives of her people who were about to be destroyed. The King asked her who was behind this and she pointed out Haman. The King's anger forced him to leave the banquet and Haman, now terrified, begged the queen for his life. As the King returned, Haman was molesting the queen and the King ordered Haman to be impaled on a pole. He was then impaled on the pole that he had set up for Mordecai.

The decree could not be changed but a new decree was issued by the King, giving permission for the Jews to assemble together and take up arms to defend themselves against any who would attack them. On that day, the Jews defended themselves and destroyed all those who sought to destroy them and thus the Jewish people were spared. They celebrated this event year after year and it was known as the festival of Purim.

1. *What does this chapter of The Story teach about God's work behind the scenes of history?*

This story teaches us that God does indeed work behind the scenes of history, permitting certain situations and circumstances and raising people up and bringing others down, all to be His instruments in accomplishing what He has purposed. This story shows us that history is really God's story and nothing will happen or not happen that will prevent His story accomplishing its purpose. All things, both good and bad, happen for a reason in God's story.

2. *How did Mordecai respond when faced with disaster?*

We read that he responded to the decree of Jewish annihilation by tearing his clothes and putting on sackcloth and ashes and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. These are signs of great sorrow and mourning in the culture of the day.

He publically declared to all people his sorrow at the decree that had been issued and called on all Jews to express sorrow and grief. He also publically declared his own nationality and background and inadvertently declared himself unashamed of his God.

His mourning ritual ended at the King's gate, hoping to get the attention of Queen Esther. He had told her to keep her nationality and background a secret, but now it was time for her to use her position for such a time as this.

3. *What character qualities do you observe in Queen Esther?*

Endearing nature – She was able to win favour in the eyes of the king's Eunuchs, including the harem and the king himself.

Courage – Esther showed great courage in going into the king's court at the risk of her life and in challenging Haman.

Loyalty – Esther did not abandon her people once she became queen, but remained loyal to them and to her God.

Diplomatic, tactful and respectful – She knew how to approach the king with her request respectfully and tactfully to win the king's decisions.

4. *When was the last time you faced a threatening situation? What was your reaction?*

For Esther, Mordecai and the Jewish people the situation was life threatening. Maybe for some it might be a life threatening situation – illness, car accident, armed robbery or hijacking. For others it might be a situation that threatens relationships that are dear to you, the threat of business deals falling apart, or the threat of hurt that loved ones might be facing.

Whatever the threatening situation might be, ask your group to think back on what their initial reaction was. Did they try and handle it themselves, did they rely on others, did they seek God's help in the situation and trust that He is working behind the scenes for our good even within the threatening situation?

5. *In what ways have you experienced God's faithfulness in your life?*

God is faithful, and so He is always faithful to us. And so the answer we want to share is, how have you experienced, how have you seen, how have you learnt, that God is faithful to His word and promises in your own life. Maybe start with some examples of your own.

6. *What steps can you take to show that you trust in the faithfulness of God?*

In the midst of life in general, and more particularly, in trouble, or in threatening situations where the outcome is unknown, pray and hold onto the promises of God to us in His Word. Even if the outcome of those situations might not have been the way you would have scripted it, your response of trust to the truth that God knows best and is working all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to his purposes, will display a trust in God's faithfulness.