



## FOCUS VERSE

### Esther 4:14

For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

## LESSON TEXT

### Esther 4:13–17

13 Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews.

14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

15 Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer,

16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.

17 So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

### Esther 5:1–5

1 Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the gate of the house.

2 And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre.

3 Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom.

4 And Esther answered, If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him.

5 Then the king said, Cause Haman to make haste, that he may do as Esther hath said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared.



## FOCUS THOUGHT

God will do the miraculous to care for His covenant people.



## CULTURE CONNECTION

### Twenty-First Century Persecution

**W**hat would it be like to face beheading, crucifixion, or gang rape because you attended church? For many Christians today “what if” scenarios such as this have become reality. As early as 2014, Amnesty International called the persecution by the Islamic State (ISIS) a “systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing which is being carried out on a historic scale.”

In addition to ISIS, pariah states such as North Korea continue to harass, imprison, and execute Christians in alarming numbers. Persecution is not limited to majority-world regions. In November 2015 the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) issued a study of global primary sources that concluded “only a small percentage of the world’s population enjoys real freedom of religion. Discrimination and persecution are

commonplace, and even martyrdom is far too common.”

The IIRF warns that this trend threatens the human rights of everyone. “Torture, genocide, and ethnic cleansing often accompany religious persecution, while the lack of [basic freedoms] are such normal parts of widespread religious persecution that they are sometimes no longer mentioned.”

Like Esther in the palace, the North American church may feel it is insulated from these events, but Mordecai’s words speak to us: “For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to [Christians] from another place; but thou and thy father’s house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14).

### OUTLINE

- I. **HAMAN’S PRIDE AND PREJUDICE**
- II. **MORDECAI’S RESPONSE**
- III. **ESTHER’S OPPORTUNITY TO BECOME PART OF A MIRACLE**
- IV. **GOD IS A COVENANT KEEPER**
  - A. God Will Save His People
  - B. Purim: the Jews’ Response to God’s Commitment to Covenant
- V. **EMBRACING A PLACE IN GOD’S PLAN**

### CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The story of Esther took place during the reign of Xerxes I (486–465 BC), the fourth ruler of Persia’s Achaemenid Empire. Xerxes is the Greek form of the Persian name Khashayarsha. In Hebrew the name is Ahasuerus. Xerxes was the son of King Darius I and Queen Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus

the Great. It was Cyrus (r. 559–530 BC) who founded the Achaemenid Empire by rebelling against his Median overlords and eventually conquering a territory that today stretches from Turkey in the northwest to Pakistan in the southeast, including Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and much of the Middle East. Those living under Achaemenid rule usually enjoyed great religious freedom, exemplified by Cyrus’s decree permitting the Jews to return from Babylonian exile and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1–4; 6:3–5).

The Book of Esther deals with the Diaspora Jews who were descendants of those who remained in Babylon after Cyrus’s decree. By the time of Xerxes, the Jewish population had spread across the Achaemenid Empire. Nearly all the events in the Book of Esther occurred in the royal city built by Darius as his winter capital, across a canal from the Elamite city of Susa (the modern city of Shush in southeast Iran). The Bible calls this large, heavily fortified complex of royal buildings

“Shushan the palace.” This was the same royal city where Nehemiah served Artaxerxes I about forty years later (Nehemiah 1:1).

The story of Esther centers on the providential deliverance of the Jews from a genocidal plot by a powerful psychopathic ruler. As such, it foreshadows the numerous times of legal and social discrimination, physical and psychological persecution, and violent pogroms (organized massacres of ethnic groups, particularly in reference to the Jews) and holocausts that have marked much of Jewish history under the Diaspora. It also foreshadows the periods and places when Christians have undergone similar treatment. In times of repression and persecution, the story provides the sure hope that God will prevail against those who seek to destroy His children. While evil plans may prevail for a time and innocent blood may flow, we are not forgotten. God will triumph.

## SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

### I. HAMAN’S PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Haman does not appear in the story until the first verse of chapter three where he is identified as the “son of Hammedatha the Agagite.” Although “Hammedatha” and “Haman” are both Persian names (as are “Esther” and “Mordecai”), “Agag” was one of the primary titles of the king of the Amalekites. This may mean that Haman was descended from the Amalekite royal family, who may have been taken into Babylonian captivity at about the same time as the Jews.

The incident that directly provoked the evil plot within the Book of Esther was Mordecai’s refusal to obey Xerxes’s command (Esther 3:2) to bow to Haman, whom Xerxes had made his vizier (high-ranking official). Although Mordecai was confronted by the king’s servants concerning his criminal act of civil disobedience, his only explanation was that he was a Jew.

By this, Mordecai could not have meant bowing to Haman would violate Jewish law. In contrast to the command to bow down in worship found in the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the command in Esther has nothing to do with idolatry. There are many biblical examples of people bowing

to their superiors, and there is no Old Testament law against it. Apparently Mordecai was purposefully slighting Haman due to Haman’s ancestry. In Exodus 17:14–16 God said He would wage war against Amalek from generation to generation, and remove the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Mordecai was identified as a Benjamite descendant of Kish. He was from the family of King Saul who had lost his throne when he refused to obey God by leaving the Amalekite king alive (I Samuel 15).

Haman is the person about whom the Book of Esther revealed the most. His emotions were identified, his thoughts revealed, and his inner dialogue exposed. The Bible portrays him as an extremely arrogant man full of his own self-importance. To him, the power he obtained as ruler above all princes in the empire seemed secondary to the adulation and praise his position could command. When Haman discovered Mordecai’s refusal to bow, instead of dealing with the actual affront, he chose to hatch a convoluted plot that would rid him not just of Mordecai, but the entire Jewish race. A reaction so highly out of proportion to the insult not only demonstrated Haman’s enormous ego but also showed how a prideful man can be manipulated by his sin to become an instrument of Satan.

In a similar manner, Haman attempted to manipulate Xerxes. Haman exaggerated Mordecai’s refusal to obey the command of Xerxes in a single circumstance into a general accusation that all Jews did not keep “the king’s laws” (Esther 3:8) and should therefore be eradicated. Writing under the name and seal of Xerxes, Haman ordered that on the thirteenth of Adar, the rulers and people of every province in the empire were “to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day . . . and to take the spoil of them for a prey” (Esther 3:13).

Today, we are experiencing a resurgence of antisemitism around the world. Even in societies that owe their foundation of freedom and justice to the influences of Judeo-Christian teachings, both Jews and Christians are increasingly being accused of fomenting hatred, violence, and prejudice. Jesus

instructed us, “If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you” (John 15:18–19). Persecution is one of the signs of the last days: “Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name’s sake” (Matthew 24:9).

## II. MORDECAI’S RESPONSE

When Haman’s decree was published, the Jewish population mourned, wailed, wept, and fasted. Many, including Mordecai, lay in sackcloth and ashes. Clearly someone had to appeal to Xerxes. However, it did not appear Mordecai would be an option since his refusal to bow to Haman was what sparked this controversy in the first place.

Instead, Mordecai turned to Esther, his adopted daughter, who had become queen. Esther would most likely have the best opportunity—because of her position with the king—to make intercession on behalf of the Jewish people.

## III. ESTHER’S OPPORTUNITY TO BECOME PART OF A MIRACLE

When young girls read the story of Esther, they frequently see Esther being chosen to take Queen Vashti’s place through a fairy tale filter. Esther was not a Disney princess, Xerxes was not her Prince Charming, and their relationship was certainly not “happily ever after.” She was forcefully swept up in a general roundup of beautiful young virgins from every district of the empire to be added, along with hundreds of others, to the harem of a merciless pagan ruler.

During her year of training in the harem, Esther had to learn the secrets of Persian beauty, which included playing an instrument, dancing, singing, court etiquette, supervision of servants, organizing banquets, the ability to listen attentively and carry on an intelligent conversation.

She was given a single night to gain the favor of Xerxes or face the real danger of becoming a concubine or even a harem entertainer who would be called upon to please important men the emperor desired

to impress with his collection of women. Her intelligence, wisdom, and humility earned her the place of honor as queen, but because of her lack of noble birth, the position probably gave her power over the harem but little political power in the empire at large.

God looked down upon the velvet prison in which Esther was an honored inmate, and He saw someone He could use to bring deliverance to His covenant people.

## IV. GOD IS A COVENANT KEEPER

### A. God Will Save His People

The Book of Esther has long been thought to be unique in that the name of God is not mentioned in it. However, in the thirteenth century, the Jewish scholar Bachya ben Asher found four places in the Hebrew text of the Book of Esther where the name of God appears in acrostic form as either the initial or final letters of four consecutive words. In the centuries following Bachya, a few scribes highlighted these places by making the letters larger than usual, and a few more acrostics of the name appearing through various manipulations of the text were also alleged to exist. However, exactly such acrostics occur randomly outside of Esther on average once every seven or eight chapters of the Hebrew Bible. In fact, there are only a handful of Old Testament books that do not contain acrostics of the divine name. In addition, the Hebrew Bible contains acrostics for various names and titles of Satan, and for numerous historical personages and events.

It would be nearly impossible to write the Book of Esther, containing more than twelve thousand Hebrew letters constituting more than five thousand words, without unintentionally creating acrostics. While it is true that intentional acrostics are found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as poetic devices, there is no scriptural evidence that we are meant to find the name of God hidden in the text of Esther. On the other hand, it is evident that we are meant to find the hand of God hidden in the story of Esther.

While the book seems to go out of its way to keep from mentioning the name or titles of Jehovah, the outcome of the story is heavily dependent on “divine coincidences” out

of the control of the people involved. There is a clear sense in which Mordecai's warning to Esther, "For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place" (Esther 4:14), came to pass, with the "other place" being God Himself.

Mordecai knew that whether Esther intervened or not, God would deliver His people from destruction. Some may read this story and conclude, "If it had not been for Esther . . .," or "If it had not been for Mordecai . . .," but their efforts were clearly not enough. "If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, now may Israel say; If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when men rose up against us: Then they had swallowed us up quick, when their wrath was kindled against us: Then the waters had overwhelmed us, the stream had gone over our soul" (Psalm 124:1-4).

### **B. Purim: the Jews' Response to God's Commitment to Covenant**

Because Xerxes was powerless to countermand a royal edict that had already received his seal, he gave Esther and Mordecai permission to write a second decree in his name and under his seal (Esther 8:8). This decree did not suspend the first but added to it that the Jews were to gather together and defend themselves on Haman's chosen day. Turning Haman's decree back on the enemies of the Jews, they were given the authority "to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them, both little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey" (Esther 8:11).

As might be expected, the effect of this decree was great rejoicing and celebration among the Jews. Also, seeing the way the political winds were blowing, many Gentiles took that occasion to convert to Judaism. On the thirteenth of Adar, Jews throughout the empire killed seventy-five thousand enemies. In the royal city, five hundred enemies were killed on the thirteenth and another three hundred on the fourteenth. Although authorized to do so, they refrained from taking the property of their enemies.

In remembrance of this great victory, Mordecai declared the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar as days of celebration, to include

feasting, joy, exchanging gifts, and giving to the poor. God literally turned their sorrow into joy. Today, the feast of Purim (named for the lots Haman cast to determine what day would be auspicious for his plot) is always celebrated one month before Passover and is considered the most joyous and fun day of the Jewish calendar.

### **V. EMBRACING A PLACE IN GOD'S PLAN**

Surely during the year of preparation and training Esther had to endure in the harem, she must have wondered how any of what she was going through could be turned to honoring God. As queen she had to give up any hope of having a normal life of a Jewish wife: reciting Scriptures and lighting lamps on the Sabbaths, going to synagogue, celebrating the feasts with her husband, and singing psalms as her children fell asleep. There was no prophet to assure her that her life would play any part in God's eternal plan, and she even had to hide the fact that she was Jewish.

Concerning Esther, Charles H. Spurgeon preached, "Every child of God is where God has placed him for some reason. You have been wishing for another position where you could do something for Jesus: do not wish anything of the kind, but serve him where you are." Often this is a difficult lesson to learn. We see ourselves weighed down by the cares of daily living, feeling guilty when problems with health, relationships, finances, or career seem to sap our time and strength, leaving us with a smaller portion to dedicate to God. We know that serving God provides the only lasting value for our lives, but it seems we have too little left of ourselves to render much service.

This is why Christians must understand that faithfully fulfilling the responsibilities of daily living can be a deep form of godly service if done unto Him. To serve our families, neighbors, employers, and society honestly, justly, lovingly, and humbly is our reasonable Christian service. If we are faithful in the life we occupy, God may expand our lives beyond what we can imagine. "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14).

## INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Esther is a favorite Bible story to many people. It has drama, comedy, a despicable villain with an outrageous evil plot, a courageous young female hero and her wise counselor, a last-minute rescue, and a triumphant celebration. And the most important detail, most seem to miss, is the miracle that covers it all.

When some think of miracles, they refer to the standard, simplistic view of miracles: an act of God that transcends natural law and is therefore inexplicable by reference to any natural process. As Norman Geisler wrote in *Miracles and the Modern Mind*, “Natural law describes naturally caused regularities; a miracle is a supernaturally caused singularity.”

Although many miracles of Scripture fit this description, miracles cannot be kept in a box. Remember, God is the author of miracles and He chooses to operate in ways that are far above our ways. In the Book of Esther, there are no prophets parting the waters, angels appearing out of nowhere, bread or oil multiplying, or any other physical manifestation of God’s supernatural intervention. In fact, God is never mentioned in the text of Esther.

But if you have ever been in a situation where the odds were stacked against you, people had decided your fate, and nothing you could do would change their minds, then you know the dire situation Esther, Mordecai, and their people were in.

So why should the story of Esther appear in a series titled *A Celebration of Miracles*? It is difficult for anyone to read the series

of interlocking and perfectly timed events without seeing the hand of God guiding every detail. The “miracle” of Esther is that God intervened on behalf of Esther and her people. God turned the heart of the king in a completely different direction and elevated the Jewish people from a place of dishonor to honor.

No amount of arguing or pleading—human effort alone—could have turned the heart of this pagan king. There was no one on his cabinet who favored the Jews and was thus able to influence his decision. His right hand man was the one behind the plot and had secured great power and influence with the king.

But one young woman, whose beauty had captivated the king’s heart, called on the name of her God, whose power changed the king’s mind, and the miraculous salvation of a nation was the result. The story of Esther is an example of God’s hidden but miraculous hand working on behalf of His covenant people.

The Bible is a book of miracles and most Apostolics today have experienced or observed true miracles. But sometimes we cry out for the dramatic, the astounding, the miraculous God to take center stage and turn our stones to bread, when all we really need is to trust in the unseen God working in the wings offstage. “I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him” (Ecclesiastes 3:14). ■

## REFLECTIONS

- Is Mordecai to blame for stirring up Haman’s anger against the Jews? Why or why not?
- Why should we take the risk to do something for the Lord if He will bring about His plan even if we don’t act (Esther 4:14)?
- What does Spurgeon’s statement “Every child of God is where God has placed him for some reason” imply about the circumstances of life? Explain.
- Share a time when you received or observed a miracle.
- Share an example or two of times when God’s hidden hand worked through situations to meet your need or that of another.