

Cindy Bassett

The Bible Corner



Queen Esther

Once upon a time in the land of Persia, there lived a most powerful king. Now the empire of this King Ahasuerus was vast indeed, stretching all the way from India to Ethiopia. The king demanded absolute obedience from all of his subjects, including his wife.

One day, the king asked something of his wife, who promptly said, "no." Unfortunately for her, she was banished at once.

"Hear ye, hear ye," the king's messenger proclaimed, "tomorrow at high noon, all those women who wish to be considered for the position of 'her royal highness' should assemble at the royal palace." And so this royal decree was posted in all of the 127 provinces of the kingdom.

A certain Mordecai, a Jew living in Persia, had raised his cousin, Esther, as his own daughter, after her parents had died. Today the woman who stood before him was a beauty in both spirit and appearance.

"Oh, Mordecai," said Esther, "I don't know. I trust you completely with my life. You've been both mother and father to me. But you forget — I am a Jew. Do you really think my place is in the palace of a foreign king? We owe our allegiance to God."

"Ah," Mordecai replied, "perhaps it is in this very position of authority that you will be able to do the most good for our people."

Esther hesitated for a few moments before she laughed, saying, "Besides, cousin, what makes you so sure that I will win the king's royal beauty contest anyway?"

"Of that I am most certain," Mordecai answered.

Surely enough, the next day, it was Esther who was selected from among all of the other beautiful women to be the new queen of Persia. When Esther told her cousin the good news, she was puzzled over his reaction.

"You must not tell anyone that we are relatives," Mordecai cautioned. "And say nothing about being Jewish."

"But, Mordecai, that would be wrong!"

Esther reasoned. "Shall I deny who I am?"

"No, but for now, say nothing," Mordecai replied. "Wait until the time is right."

A few days later, Mordecai discovered a plot to assassinate the king by two of his own men. Mordecai sent word to Esther, and the king's life was saved. Still, Mordecai told his cousin to say nothing.

Now there lived those days in the kingdom an evil man named Haman. This Haman was so obsessed with his own power and wealth that he managed to elevate himself to the position of prime minister, second in command only to the king. One of the very first things he did in his new job was to write a law commanding all of the subjects to bow down to him whenever he passed them in the streets.

All of the citizens in the kingdom obeyed him, but one. "I bow to no one but the one true God," Mordecai insisted.

Time after time, Haman passed Mordecai, and Mordecai refused to bow. Haman was so furious that he decided not to act against Mordecai alone, but against all of the Jewish people living in the kingdom. So he went to the king and said, "Your highness, I must sadly inform you that there is within your kingdom a certain group of people who are not obedient to you. They choose to obey their own laws. Therefore, I think it is in your best interest to destroy them."

"Haman," the king said, "you are my prime minister. I give you permission to do as you like with these people."

Immediately, Haman wrote a cruel edict and sent it by messenger to be posted throughout the kingdom. It was written: "Next year, on the 28th day of February, all of the Jews living in the kingdom must be killed. Their property and possessions shall be given to those who kill them." Haman, who was a very superstitious man, chose the day for the great purge by casting lots.

When Mordecai read this edict, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes in accordance with the Jewish custom of

mourning. And throughout the entire kingdom, there was heard a great wailing.

Mordecai sent the following message to Esther through her servants: "Do you think that you will escape in the palace when all of the Jews are killed? Don't you see? This is why God has made you queen of Persia."

Esther asked Mordecai to gather all of the Jews of the city together and fast and pray for her for three days. Even though it was strictly forbidden, she promised that she would go to see the king.

Three days passed. Esther put on her royal robes and entered the inner court of the king.

"What do you wish, Queen Esther?" the king said, motioning for her to approach the throne. "Even if it is half of my kingdom, I will give it to you."

"I would like for you and your prime minister, Haman, to come to a banquet today that I have specially had prepared for you."

When the king and Haman sat at Esther's table the king again asked, "Now my queen, tell me your request so that I can honor it."

"Come to a banquet again tomorrow and I will most certainly tell you my request," Esther replied.

Haman was overjoyed at this privilege, but his mood quickly changed when he passed Mordecai at the palace gates, and Mordecai refused to bow down to him.

When Haman returned home and told his wife, she answered, "You are so important to the king, I am sure if you ask him, he will allow you to kill Mordecai now. Make ready the gallows today, and tomorrow, your troubles will be over."

That night, the king couldn't sleep, so he spent the night reading all of the historical records of his kingdom. This is how he finally learned that it was Mordecai who had saved his life.

"What reward have we given to Mordecai for his bravery?" the king asked his advisors.

"Nothing, sir," they informed him.

As soon as Haman arrived at the palace the next day, the king asked him, "What should I do to honor a man who has shown himself to be a loyal subject worthy of my praise?"

"Why, he is describing me!" Haman said to himself.

So he turned to the king and said,

happily, "Bring this man through the entire city, dressed in royal robes and riding your own horse, and proclaim, 'This is how the king rewards a man who has truly pleased him!'"

"Excellent idea, prime minister!" replied the king, as Haman smiled broadly.

"Well, Haman," the king said, "what are you waiting for? Go to Mordecai and carry out this plan exactly as you have described it."

Later that day, as planned, Haman attended Esther's second banquet. As soon as they were seated, the king turned to the queen and said, "Tell me your request at once."

"Save my life!" Esther cried. "Save the lives of my people!"

"Your own prime minister, Haman, has written a law which commands that all of the Jews in your kingdom be killed!" cried Esther.

Haman grew pale with fright. "Is this true, Haman?" the king demanded.

Before Haman could compose himself, one of the king's aides rushed in and cried, "Haman has ordered a gallows to be constructed. He plans to hang Mordecai, the man who saved your life!"

The king rose and glared at Haman. Then he turned to his aide and commanded, "Hang Haman on these gallows."

Queen Esther had saved her people. When she finally told the king about her cousin, Mordecai, the king appointed him the new prime minister.

As prime minister, Mordecai wrote two new decrees in the name of the king. The first decree stated that Jews throughout the kingdom could defend themselves and their property against anyone who tried to destroy them. On February 28, no one dared to raise a hand against any of the Jews.

The second decree announced an annual holiday to commemorate this great event in the history of the Jews. On this day, Jews everywhere would celebrate how Queen Esther saved their lives and turned their sorrow into joy.

Today, the Jewish people still observe this day in February or March. This holiday is known as Purim or the Festival of Lots. The word for "lots is *pur* in Persian; Haman chose the day to destroy the Jews by casting lots. In 1987, Purim falls on March 15.

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