



## ***LIFE LESSONS FROM THE LADIES; Part Two***

### **ESTHER: LESSON 3**

This week we finally get to meet the woman our book is named after! Introducing Hadassah, or Esther. For many, Esther has been read like a Cinderella story, a “rags to riches” drama where a young, beautiful, courageous woman saves a nation. It’s easy to overlook some of the difficulties in the story, like the young women who were taken from their homes as we discussed last week. We kind of skip right past that to get to the good stuff! Even the character of Esther. She’s almost always portrayed as a perfect little Jewish girl without a flaw or blemish. I spent a lot of time reading about and studying our heroine, and on my journey to get to know her better, I was almost bummed that I discovered some “flaws.” Esther wasn’t perfect, as much as I didn’t want to admit it. Esther wasn’t always courageous and brave. But after I got over my feelings of being let down, I was actually excited. God doesn’t need to use perfect people, right? God uses flawed, imperfect sinners like you and me to build His kingdom. Instead of being discouraged, I was even more encouraged that He used this ordinary young woman “for such a time as this.” I like what Carolyn Custus James wrote about this; “Over time, I came to see the value of being honest about people in the Bible as the Bible is. Their flaws, failures and sins are on record for a purpose – not for us to gloss over or excuse them or (worst of all) to look down on them because we haven’t made the same mistakes. We’ll never find ourselves in Esther’s story if we convince ourselves she’s perfect. Only in seeing her flaws do we find courage to face our own. Through Esther’s failings we discover God’s heart for flawed people and find hope for ourselves.” It’s also pretty ironic that at a time where women were disrespected and overlooked, God uses a woman to save His people. Crazy, right?

Just a reminder: Babylon had taken almost all of Judah’s people into exile, and then was overthrown by the Persians. The words of Deuteronomy 28:63-67 came to pass during the time of Esther. (“The Lord will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to another.”) In Lamentations 1:3, the prophet Jeremiah had said, “After affliction and harsh labor, Judah had gone into exile. She dwells among the nations; she finds no resting place.” This was a



subsequent years, other Jews returned to Israel; but Mordecai chose to remain in the Persian capital. While the Babylonians made life difficult for the Jews, the Persians were more lenient to aliens; and many Jews prospered in the land of their captors. Mordecai eventually held an official position in the government and sat at the king's gate (Esther 2:21)."

3. According to verse 8, Esther was "taken" to the palace. Does it seem like it was voluntary?
  
4. Why do you suppose Mordecai and Esther kept their nationality a secret?
  
5. Did Hegai like Esther? How do you know? What recurring theme do you find in verse 9, 15, and 17?

Verse 11 tells us that Mordecai paced back and forth in front of the palace. Can you just imagine that? Wouldn't you be doing the same if you had a daughter or family member in there? He must have been worried sick! So he paces ... every day. His anxiousness is obvious.

6. Describe the process the women had to go through. What effect do you think this had on them emotionally and mentally? (The potential for rejection would have been hard to handle.)

That's all for today. Looking forward to a great discussion tomorrow. For now, work on your memory verse and ask the Lord to reveal Himself to you as we continue on through this chapter!

**Memory Verse of the Week:** "The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight ..." Esther 2:17b

## Second Day

**Work on your verse. It's an easy one, but it truly summarizes the chapter!**

Today we are going to visit a topic we briefly touched on yesterday. It should be eye opening!

1. What are your thoughts about Esther and Mordecai keeping their nationality a secret? Right? Wrong? Consider the consequences they would face, as well as the compromise they would have had to make. Did all Jews assimilate into the culture they were living in rather than maintain their Hebrew customs? Consider Daniel in Babylon, Joseph in Egypt, etc. (Write your own thoughts before you read mine below!) Don't be afraid to be honest!

This is a hard question that we really don't have an answer for. We weren't there, Scripture doesn't say, and it's easy to form an opinion from the comforts of our own home when we aren't the ones making the hard decision. But all we know from the text is that she kept quiet because Mordecai told her to. But did she have to? Should Mordecai have kept quiet as well? Some scholars believe she was being wise by obeying him and exalted her character, while making no mention of the fact that she seemed to assimilate into Persian culture when Ezra and Nehemiah were dealing with the problems of Jews marrying Gentiles (Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 13:23-27) back in the land. Esther and Mordecai must have completely ignored the Jews' dietary laws and laws of Moses, along with God's commands for His people to remain sexually pure, live godly lives, as well as not intermarrying with Gentiles. The Law of Moses prohibited all kinds of illicit sex as well as mixed marriages (Exodus 20:14; 34:16; Lev. 18; Deut. 7:1-4) Matthew Henry feels that as long as no one had asked them, they had every right to conceal their true identity. He said, "All truths are not to be spoken at all times." Whereas Wiersbe says to that, "The fact that they never acknowledged the God of Israel in the midst of that pagan society is unfortunate. When you consider the backslidden state of the Jewish nation at the time, the disobedience of the Jewish remnant in the Persian Empire, and the unspiritual lifestyle of Mordecai and Esther, is it any wonder that the name of God is absent from this book. Would you want to identify your holy name with such an unholy people?" Carolyn Custus James also holds that opinion. She writes, "Esther was beautiful and pleasing and she was losing her way. She seemed to accept culture's view that beauty was all she had to offer. She forgot who she was, Hadassah, a daughter of the covenant, a descendant of Abraham, and God's



5. Do you ever struggle to try to “fit in” with this world because you don’t want to be different? In what ways? Have you experienced any adverse consequences as a result?
  
6. Read what Jesus said about this in Matthew 5:13-16. What are we called to do? To be?
  
7. I think it takes courage and bravery to be a believer today. What do you think? Why do I say that?
  
8. So ... if Esther was compromising, why did God allow this Jewish girl to become the wife of a pagan king? Again, how does this point to God’s providence?

This is another one of those hard questions to understand concerning God’s providence. He doesn’t “make” us disobey, yet He directs the circumstances. Had Esther not been born into the Jewish race, she could never have saved this nation from disaster. Their “silence” about their nationality was used by God because He had a special work for them to accomplish. Even if Mordecai’s motive was selfish and he was only thinking of their safety, God had something greater in mind. God never makes us sin, always remember that.

Esther’s courage and bravery kicks in soon, thank goodness! The difficulty she faces will soon drive her to “find herself” and remember who, or “Whose” she was. And when we submit to God, nothing is impossible!

### **Third Day**

**Go over your memory verse.**

1. Read Esther 2:1-23 again, focusing on verses 12-23. What were the girls allowed to do when they met the king, according to verse 13? What did Esther take?

About this section, Charles Swindoll wrote, “Clearly, the process of preparing for a night with the king was lengthy and expensive. Imagine the setting: it must have been like going into Nordstrom or Neiman-Marcus and being able to take any of the dresses off the rack, any jewelry from the showcase, and a whole line of cosmetic products – all at no cost. No doubt, most of the women went on an extravagant and unrestrained shopping spree. Except for Esther.” I immediately thought of the scene in the movie *Sweet Home Alabama* when Patrick Dempsey asks Reese Witherspoon to marry him, and when she accepts, all the lights go on in Tiffany’s and she gets to pick any ring she wants! (I love that scene!)

2. Most scholars attribute this simply to Esther’s beauty, but why was this such a wise move on her part?
  
3. How does the king react to Esther? (What part do you think God plays in this?)

Esther won “favor” with all who saw her. Was it simply her beauty or was it more about her character? I prefer to think it was both. God used her beauty to open doors of opportunity, but I believe her beauty went deeper than that, as will soon be revealed. The king throws another party, so it’s time for feasting again! There’s a new Queen in the land! King Xerxes sees a beautiful lady, but we all see beyond that. This Jewish orphan rises to the position of first lady in this foreign empire, soon to influence the rest of the story! God’s fingerprint is on every page.

4. According to Proverbs 31:30, what makes a woman truly beautiful? What kind of “beauty treatments” accomplish the right kind of beauty? 😊 Are you making yourself beautiful for the King of Kings??
  
5. In verse 19, why do you think the “virgins” were gathering together a second time? Why was Mordecai there? Was Esther, do you think, responsible for that?

In the East, the king's gate was a place of honor and authority. I read that the gate was the ancient equivalent of our modern law courts, the place where important official business was transacted. (Ruth 4:1; Dan. 2:48-49) Obviously Esther wasn't the only one who found "favor" with people!

6. What plot does Mordecai overhear? How was God providentially working through Mordecai as he simply "did his job"? How was he strategically placing him?

Xerxes experienced a major military loss in 480 B.C. at Salamis which caused unrest in his empire. This could have possibly been the reason for the threat of treason. Although we can't see what God is doing behind the scenes, God wants us to be faithful to do whatever He's called us to do, one day at a time. An instance as simple as overhearing something and doing the right thing furthers this important story. Staying in God's will by walking in the Spirit is God's desire for us! One day at a time, even when we don't know the bigger picture.

7. Are you being faithful in the little things? Are you asking the Holy Spirit to guide you each and every day, in each and every decision? Even when life seems "mundane," are you doing each task to the best of your ability, with His glory in mind?

8. Do you think God still places people strategically to accomplish His will? How about you? How can truly believing that change your perspective on situations?

9. When Mordecai informed Esther, who informed the king, the situation was immediately handled. What do you think Mordecai and Esther began to realize?



Usually the king would give an extravagant reward to someone who showed such loyalty to him, but Mordecai was not given a thing. We don't see him complain, but we know from our first reading of the story, his sacrifice is honored later in ways Mordecai couldn't have imagined. His deed was permanently recorded and will come to light later in our story. We often deserve rewards or recognition for things we've done, yet we can be overlooked. Spiritually speaking, we know that God sees everything we do and often we must wait until Heaven to get rewarded. He "permanently records" all we do. This is a truth we know, but sometimes don't accept too well.

10. Do you feel that you've been "cheated" by God in some way? Do you feel all your "good works" should be rewarded immediately? Are you becoming bitter? How does Mordecai's example in this encourage you?

See you tomorrow, ladies! May you be obedient to Him today, not for the sake of rewards, but for the sheer opportunity to bless and please the Lord!

#### **Fourth Day**

##### **What's your verse?**

1. Read Esther 3:1-6. I guess it's time for Mordecai to speak up! Summarize what is happening in these six verses. (This takes place about 4 years after Esther becomes queen.)
  
2. Hangman, oops, I mean Haman, is an Agagite. Read 1 Samuel 15 to gain some insight on where the Agagites came from and why Haman would be hostile towards the Jews. Write a short summary of what you find out.

3. Being the king's right-hand man would be a position of high respect and honor. With that position would come the expectation of being worshipped and honored with a "bow." Why wouldn't Mordecai do it? Who "tells" on him?
  
4. Mordecai finally comes clean about being a Jew. Why do you think Haman didn't just kill Mordecai instead of planning to execute the whole race? (vs 6)

We are beginning to see Mordecai's strength of character. He admits he's a Jew, and with that public confession, refuses to pay homage to this man. Why didn't he want to bow? For the Persians, bowing to Haman meant nothing more than an act of reverence, but to a Jew, it meant a demonstration of worship. Daniel is a good example of this concept in Daniel 6. I did read, however, that Jews weren't violating the second commandment (Exodus 20:4-6) when they bowed before authority any more than Christians do today when we show respect to leaders. Wiersbe wrote, "For instance, Abraham bowed down to the sons of Heth when he negotiated with them for Sarah's grave (Gen. 23:7). Also Joseph's brothers bowed down before Joseph, thinking he was an Egyptian official (42:6). David even bowed before Saul (1 Sam. 24:8), and Jacob and his family bowed before Esau (Gen. 33:3; 6-7). The Jews even bowed to one another (2 Sam. 14:4). Perhaps Mordecai wouldn't bow because Haman was an Agagite and they were enemies of the Jews. The Lord swore and put in writing that He had declared war on them and would fight them from generation to generation (Exodus 17:16). How could Mordecai show homage to the enemy of the Jews and the enemy of the Lord? Perhaps his controversy was not a personal quarrel with a proud man, it was Mordecai's declaration that he was on God's side of the national struggle between the two. He didn't want to be as guilty as Saul by being too lenient and losing his crown." Hmmm ...

5. What can we tell, so far, about Haman's character? How "could" Haman have dealt with the situation differently?

I mentioned before that the Book of Esther is read publicly in the synagogue on the Feast of Purim. Whenever the reader mentions Haman's name, the people "Boo" or stomp their feet and say, "May his name be blotted out!" To Jews everywhere, his name represents everyone who has tried to exterminate the Jewish people. His "evilness" will grow throughout our drama. God permitted him to be exalted to a place of honor because He has a purpose to fulfill in him. Yep, yet another act of providence. Wiersbe called him a "small man in a big office." He was vain, wanting to appear larger and more important than He was.

6. Hate filled Haman's heart. Hate does horrible things to our hearts, doesn't it? Often we dislike someone, yet when we don't deal with our hearts and ask God to soften and change them, that dislike can turn to anger, bitterness, and hatred. Is there someone in your life, past or present, that you feel you hate, almost hate, or dislike intensely? What do these verses tell us about hate? Read 1 John 2:9-11; 3:15; and 4:20-21. (Is it time to do something about it?)

7. How does hate destroy the "hater"?

Mordecai practiced what we would call "civil disobedience." Not for the sake of simply causing trouble, or starting riots, or burning down buildings, but for the sake of obeying God rather than man. Others in Scripture did the same. (See Exodus 1:15-22; Dan. 1; Dan. 3; Acts 5:29 for examples.) It took courage to make this stand. I love this quote by Martin Luther: "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise."

8. Courage is something we're going to begin to see on every page of our story. Is God working in your heart in the "courage category"? How so? What are you afraid of? In what ways do you lack courage?

See you tomorrow, friends!

### **Fifth Day**

**Write out your memory verse.**

1. Read Esther 3:7-9. Haman makes a move. Describe his plan as he lays it before the king. What reasons does he give for wanting them dead?
2. Read Proverbs 6:16-19. How many of these “things” is Haman guilty of?

Ten thousand talents of silver equaled 375 tons estimated to represent two-thirds of the annual income of the entire Persian Empire. I’m sure he planned to get that from the plunder of those he killed. “Pur” is a Persian word for “lot.” He wasn’t obviously consulting God, since he used the local astrologers for help. The decision, however, was certainly of the Lord, because it gave the Jews a whole year to get ready, and Mordecai and Esther time to act. (Proverbs 16:33) He did this privately before he talked to the king to probably make sure “the gods” were on his side!

3. He asks the king for a decree, which we’ll read more about next week. For now, what do you think spoke to your heart the most in this lesson or chapter?
4. Sometimes we think it’s unfair when an ungodly leader is appointed to authority. How does this lesson speak to that, so far?
5. If the Lord revealed to you something you need to “do,” someone you need to forgive, or something you need to ponder more fully, how do you plan to be obedient?

