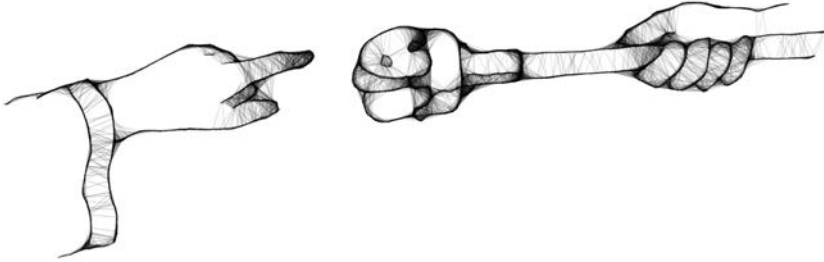


Esther *and* Mordecai



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Esther 1–10, 1 Cor. 9:19–23, John 4:1–26, Acts 17:26, Matt. 22:21, Rom. 1:18–20.*

Memory Text: “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?” (*Esther 4:14, NIV*).

Esther was used to carry out a high-level, specialized mission within the dangerous political heart of the Persian Empire. Her mission involved her in a series of striking contrasts. An orphaned female member of a despised ethnic and religious minority living in the superpower of her day, she became the wife of the Persian king. This was no rags-to-riches fairy tale. Rather, she was lifted from obscurity and groomed to carry out a highly specialized mission. It required of her the risky strategy of working, at first, undercover. Later she had to make a perilous full disclosure of her ethnicity and faith.

Supported by her cousin and foster father Mordecai, her daring witness at the intrigue-ridden court of the Persian Empire saved her people, reversed their low social status, and made them empire-wide objects of admiration.

No doubt as a result of her faithfulness, knowledge of the true God became more widespread among their heathen captors. Though not your “typical” missionary story, the narrative of Esther and Mordecai does present some interesting principles that can help us to understand what it means to witness in peculiar circumstances.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 8.

Esther in Persia

Read Esther 1:2–20. What is happening here? What things about this story are hard to understand from our perspective today? (As you read, remember that a lot of details are not presented.)

The weeklong banquet that King Ahasuerus gave for his nobles and officials seems extravagant, even for someone at the pinnacle of political power, far beyond what most Christians would find acceptable. The unrestricted consumption of alcohol (*Esther 1:7, 8*) was unusual, because drinking during ancient formal feasts was usually controlled by convention and ritual. In this case, it clouded the king’s judgment to the point that he ordered his wife Vashti to provide entertainment for the king’s drunken, all-male gathering. This was far beneath her dignity as a married woman and as a member of the royal family. Whatever her response, she faced the dilemma of losing status, and her courageous choice to retain self-esteem in the face of an autocratic ruler’s base desires prepares the reader to understand the power for good that a principled woman could exert, even in a male-dominated royal court.

Meanwhile, though, we have to deal with the actions of Esther. Esther 2:3 gives the impression that these women were not volunteers. The king issued the decree, and so Esther had to come. Had she refused, who knows the outcome?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. In what ways can we apply the principles seen in these verses to what happened with Esther? Or do they apply?

So far in the story the real heroine is Vashti, who then disappears from history. Her modesty and stand on principle opened the way for Esther. In some cases, though, principled stands don’t always lead to an obvious good. In the end, why should we take principled stands, even if we don’t know the outcome of our actions?

Esther in the Court of the King

Read Esther 2:10, 20. What situations might arise where nationality or religious affiliation should be hidden, at least for a time?

Read John 4:1–26, the story of Jesus and the woman at the well. Why did Jesus tell her so openly that He was the Messiah, when among His own people He was not so forthcoming? How does this account, perhaps, help us to understand Mordecai’s words to Esther?

Twice Mordecai charged Esther not to reveal her nationality and family background. This has troubled some commentators, who have questioned the need for this attitude of concealment, especially during a time when the Jewish people were not threatened. Could she not have been a witness about her God to these pagans if she were open about who she was and the God she worshiped? Or could it be argued that to be a Jew lacked credibility at the Persian court and that revealing her ethnicity would have hindered her in gaining access to the king when she pleaded for her people? It appears that even before the threat occurred, Mordecai had warned Esther not to reveal her identity. The fact is that the Bible does not tell us the reason for his words to her; however, as we can see with the example of Jesus, one does not have to reveal everything at once in every circumstance. Prudence is a virtue.

Meanwhile, why did Jesus speak so openly to the woman at the well and not to His own people?

“Christ was far more reserved when He spoke to them. That which had been withheld from the Jews, and which the disciples were afterward enjoined to keep secret, was revealed to her. Jesus saw that she would make use of her knowledge in bringing others to share His grace.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 190.

Have you ever been in a situation in which you deemed it prudent not to say too much about your faith or your beliefs? What reasons did you have? As you look back now, what might you have done differently, if anything?

“For Such a Time as This”

In Esther 3:1–5, the plot of the story starts to unfold. Mordecai, a Jew—following the commandment against idolatry—refused to bow down to Haman, a mere man. Furious, Haman sought a way to avenge himself for what he took as a slight. Mordecai, by his actions, in a way was witnessing among these pagans about the true God.

What excuse did Haman use to try to rid the empire of the Jews? **What** does this tell us about how easy it is to let cultural differences blind us to the humanity of all people? *Esther 3:8–13; see also Acts 17:26.*

As Haman’s plot was made known, Mordecai expressed his grief visibly, using one of the Jewish religious rituals mentioned in the book of Esther: “He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, . . . wailing loudly and bitterly” (*Esther 4:1, NIV*). In the meantime, Esther prepared to go before the king. She would become a Jewish breaker of royal Persian law by heroically entering the king’s presence without invitation, as part of a plan to foil Haman’s plot. The king admitted her and accepted her invitation to dine. Esther now takes the lead in the drama faced by the Jewish exiles across all of Persia. In this story, Esther showed self-denial and heroism (*vs. 16*), tact (*Esther 5:8*), and courage (*Esther 7:6*).

“Through Esther the queen[,] the Lord accomplished a mighty deliverance for His people. At a time when it seemed that no power could save them, Esther and the women associated with her, by fasting and prayer and prompt action, met the issue, and brought salvation to their people.

“A study of women’s work in connection with the cause of God in Old Testament times will teach us lessons that will enable us to meet emergencies in the work today. We may not be brought into such a critical and prominent place as were the people of God in the time of Esther; but often converted women can act an important part in more humble positions.”—Ellen G. White Comments, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1140.

Read Esther 4:14, Mordecai’s famous words to Esther: “ ‘Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?’ ” (NKJV). In what ways might the principle behind these words apply to you, right now?

Mordecai and Haman

According to Esther 5–8, how was Esther able to save her people?

The accounts of Esther's two banquets bring the story to its crisis point. They also record the great reversal of the plotted ethnic extermination. On the way, the story exposes the difference between true honor and self-honor, and it records the punishment of the villain. These court intrigues had far-reaching consequences. They give us a glimpse into the behind-the-scenes workings of an absolute monarch and his court. Esther and Mordecai used their positions, their knowledge of the culture in which they lived, and their faith in God's covenant promises to His people to bring about their deliverance.

Meanwhile, despite his quiet life of service, Mordecai let his faith be known, if through no other means than his refusal to bow down before Haman. People noticed, and they admonished him, but he refused to compromise his faith (*Esther 3:3–5*). This, surely, was a witness to others.

Read Esther 6:1–3. What does this tell us about Mordecai? What lessons could we draw about how God's people can function, even witness, in foreign lands?

Though Mordecai obviously was following the Lord, nevertheless he showed allegiance, and loyalty, to the sovereign of the nation in which he lived. While refusing to bow before a man, he still was a good citizen, in that he exposed the plot against the king. Though we can't read too much into the fact that he hadn't been honored for this act, very possibly he did it and then just went on his way, not expecting any reward. In time, though, as the story shows, his good deed was more than rewarded. His example here is perhaps best expressed by these words: " 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's' " (*Matt. 22:21, NKJV*).

When Some Gentiles Became Jews

Read Esther 8. Focus specifically on verse 17. How can we understand this in terms of outreach and witness?

No question, the book of Esther is not a “typical” story about outreach and witness. And yet, we can see something like this scenario happening here toward the end. As a result of the king’s edict on behalf of the Jews, “many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them” (*Esther 8:17, NIV*). Some commentators argue that theirs could not have been a true conversion experience, since fear and anxiety should have no place in proselytizing. While that’s true, who knows in the longer run how these people, whatever their motives at first, might have responded to the working of the Holy Spirit, especially after seeing great differences between their beliefs and the belief and worship of the one true God?

Read Romans 1:18–20. How might the concepts taught here come into play with these people, especially in the context of this story?

In the original decrees against the Jews, not only were the Jews to be killed, but the ones to do it were told that they should “plunder their possessions” (*Esther 3:13, NKJV*). Also, when the Jews were given permission to kill their enemies, they, too, were told that they could “plunder” the possessions of their enemies (*Esther 8:11, NKJV*). However, three times in the book of Esther (*9:10, 15, 16, NKJV*) it specifically says that the Jews did not “lay a hand on the plunder” (*NKJV*). Though the texts don’t say why, the fact that it was mentioned three times shows the emphasis that was placed on this act. Most likely they refrained because they wanted it known that they were acting out of self-defense and not greed.

How can we make sure that in our outreach and witness to others we don’t do anything that would cause people to question our motives? Why is this so important?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “In the Days of Queen Esther,” *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 598–606.

“The decree that will finally go forth against the remnant people of God will be very similar to that issued by Ahasuerus against the Jews. Today the enemies of the true church see in the little company keeping the Sabbath commandment a Mordecai at the gate. The reverence of God’s people for His law is a constant rebuke to those who have cast off the fear of the Lord and are trampling on His Sabbath.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 605.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What parallel can we draw between the edict that was brought against the Jews and what will happen in the last days as the issue of the “mark of the beast” comes to the forefront?
- 2 Both ancient Jews and Christians disputed the right of the book of Esther to have a place in the Old Testament canon. It did not appear in the Old Testament used by the community that produced the Dead Sea scrolls, nor in the Old Testament of the churches of ancient Turkey and Syria. The name of God does not appear in the book of Esther, while there are about 190 references to the heathen king. There are no references to sacrifice, temple, or worship, although fasting and prayer are mentioned. Finally, the covenant emphasis on forgiveness and mercy is not mentioned. And yet, the Lord saw fit to include it in the canon. Why? What powerful spiritual lesson can we take from it about how God can work in our lives for good, even amid what appear to be very difficult circumstances?
- 3 Dwell more on the idea of times during which missionaries and others doing outreach do not openly talk about their identity and work. What are some valid reasons (if any) for us to do that, especially in the context of mission? Sometimes, for instance, missionaries are very careful not to say who they are, especially in countries that are hostile to Christian witness. If we are impressed not to reveal right away who we are, how can we do it in a way that is not being dishonest or deceitful?

A Gift From the River: Part 2

by DONESHOR TRIPURA, BANGLADESH

Doneshor felt a fervent desire to know the truth. He decided to mark with a red pencil everything he found in the Bible and in the Bhagavad Gita that was good and helpful. Soon he realized that he was marking nearly everything in the Bible. Doneshor decided that one day he would be a Christian, though he had no idea how or when that would happen.

He entered college and had little time to read, but his desire to know God never left him. When he returned home after college, he met an old friend in the marketplace.

“I’ve become a Christian,” his friend told him. Doneshor was thrilled. He told him about finding the Bible in the river and then said, “Tell me how can I become a Christian?”

His friend’s face lit up, and he hugged Doneshor. Then he told him that in a city about thirty miles [forty-five kilometers] away, there was a church where Doneshor could learn how to become a Christian.

Early Saturday morning, Doneshor boarded a bus to the town where the church was located. He found the house church and went in. Everyone sat with their eyes closed. Doneshor didn’t realize they were praying. He looked at them. *They look like normal people*, he thought. When they opened their eyes, they were surprised to see Doneshor standing near the door. They welcomed him and invited him to join them.

Doneshor attended the church as often as he could, but he couldn’t go every week because the bus fare was expensive. But he felt great joy in what he was learning and began telling his friends about it. Some wanted to visit the church, too, so the little group agreed to take turns going, sharing the expense of the bus fare. Then those who had gone could teach the others what they had learned.

For a year, Doneshor and his friends attended church this way. Then Doneshor told the pastor that he wanted to be baptized. The pastor was happy to arrange the baptism but apologized because the little church had no baptistry. “We’ll have to baptize you in the Chengi River,” the pastor said.

“That’s wonderful!” Doneshor responded. “The same river that brought me the Bible will seal my covenant with God.”

Doneshor and 24 others were baptized in the river where his quest for God had begun. Among those other 24 were seven friends who Doneshor had invited to learn about Christ. They are the first Christians among the Tripura people.

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The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Esther 4:14*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that God places His followers in certain places and times to promote life and the values of His kingdom.

Feel: Foster a feeling of selfless love and responsibility for the welfare of others.

Do: Undertake to use talents and gifts to promote God’s mission.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: For Such a Time as This

A Situations that the world would describe as accidental or coincidental may actually be God-given opportunities for service. How can we be more open to recognizing these opportunities for promoting God’s kingdom?

B Mordecai tells Esther that if she remains silent, deliverance will come “from another place.” Theologians have speculated whether this is a veiled reference for God. Although God’s name is not mentioned, what evidence do you see for His presence in the book of Esther?

II. Feel: Life-Giving Mission

A How does it make you feel to review God’s past leading in your life?

B Do you feel as motivated to care for the lives of others as you did when you first became a Christian? What might your response say about your connection with Christ?

III. Do: Becoming Involved

A In what ways might you be called to act as a modern-day Esther—not necessarily on as big a stage but in your daily life?

▶ **Summary:** God today still calls on men and women to be available as His representatives in promoting life and the values of the kingdom of heaven.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Esther 4:14*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Only God can provide us with the strength and courage to make correct spiritual choices to promote life and His mission in stressful and desperate situations.

Just for Teachers: The book of Esther is frustratingly silent on many details, including the role of spiritual training in Mordecai’s house in forming Esther’s character and in the part God plays in the story. We have to read between the lines and see the evidence of God’s work. Of course, this is true of all history. As Ellen G. White reminds us: “In the annals of human history the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as dependent on the will and prowess of man. The shaping of events seems, to a great degree, to be determined by his power, ambition, or caprice. But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold, behind, above, and through all the play and counter-play of human interests and power and passions, the agencies of the all-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will.”—*Education*, p. 173.

Take the opportunity this week to help your class “read between the lines” in Esther and find principles that can help guide our mission today.

Opening Discussion: The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. . . . To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (*1 Cor: 9:20, 22, NIV*). In many ways this is a confronting passage of Scripture. What exactly does Paul mean by becoming “all things to all people”? The religious sect called “The Family” used to be known as the “Children of God.” In the 1970s, they began a recruiting practice that their founder, David Berg, called “flirty fishing”—basically using sexuality to lure people. Although no longer practiced, the David Berg Web site still defends this method of religious prostitution: “Over 100,000 people were led to faith in Christ because of the sacrificial love of Family men and women who were willing to go to such lengths to share the Lord’s love.”

Discussion Questions: What is meant by the apostle Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 9:22? Did Esther go too far in becoming “all things to all people”? Why, or why not? Where do we draw the line?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Mordecai and Esther were strangers in a strange land. They were Jews in a pagan nation and had in one sense assimilated with their community—nobody knew they were Jews. In another sense, they had kept themselves as a separate Jewish community in Susa and kept their own fast (*Esther 4:16*). Use the story of Esther to explore with your class the ways that we as Christians should best interact in communities that do not share our religious beliefs.

Bible Commentary

I. The Need for Preparation (*Review Esther 4:12–16 with your class.*)

No doubt Esther’s spiritual training in the home of Mordecai had strengthened her character in preparation for the challenges life might bring (*Esther 2:20*). But they never could have envisaged the monumental task she would face in trying to save the lives of her people. But before risking everything by approaching the king, Esther decides to make a final preparation. She tells Mordecai to bring together all the Jews in Susa to fast for three days and nights. Only after this preparation will she feel ready to go to the king—and “if I perish, I perish” (*Esther 4:16*).

God’s preparation time can sometimes be long and uneventful. Moses spent 40 years in the desert caring for sheep. But the refining of our characters is essential to God’s plan for our lives. And Esther’s example reminds us of the importance of proper spiritual preparation instead of just launching, in our own strength, into important decisions and actions.

Consider This: In what ways have you seen God work in your life, preparing you for various tasks?

II. Our Weakness Made Strong (*Review with your class Esther 7:3, 4; Daniel 6:19–22; Genesis 39:2, 3.*)

In many ways, the story of Esther parallels that of Joseph and Daniel. In each case, the central dramas play out in royal courts on pagan stages far from Israel. Like Joseph and Daniel, Esther the orphan has been deprived of her family. Despite adhering to a foreign religion and having no status or influence, they all rise from obscurity to political prominence—Joseph and Daniel to top leadership roles, Esther to royalty. In all three stories, the king and Pharaoh have troubled sleep or dream dreams, which prove pivotal to the plot. And through these three people, God blesses nations and peoples.

The biblical narrative clearly outlines the role God plays in the trajectory of Joseph’s and Daniel’s lives. We learn that God causes an official to show favor to Daniel (*Dan. 1:9*), gives Daniel knowledge and understanding (*vs. 17*), and reveals to him the meaning of dreams (*Dan. 2:19*). Daniel continually prays to and praises God (*vss. 20–23*), and his influence leads pagan kings to acknowledge his God (*vs. 47*). Likewise, the Bible repeatedly tells us that God was with Joseph (*Gen. 39:2, 21, 23*) and that God blessed Potiphar’s household through Joseph (*vs. 5*). And again, Pharaoh, a pagan ruler, is led to acknowledge God (*Gen. 41:38, 39*).

However, as has often been noted, God seems totally absent from the book of Esther—and is given no credit for what happens. Daniel and Isaiah were clearly observant Jews and public about their faith as they performed their roles. But Esther doesn’t reveal her religious hand, so to speak, until she is forced to do so.

Whatever the explanation for her reticence about God or the absence of the mention of His name in the book, Esther certainly rose to the occasion at the crucial time. And we can take comfort that God can work through all human beings, no matter their predispositions or weaknesses, to accomplish His mission.

Consider This: In what ways do we see the hand of God guiding our lives? Invite the class to share personal testimonies of how they believe that God has led them.

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Genocide is averted in the book of Esther. Yet, within this narrative development, God’s name is not even mentioned once in the text. Discuss with your class the challenge of keeping faith when God seems absent.

Application: The prophet Jeremiah says to God, “I would speak with you about your justice” (*Jer. 12:1, NIV*). At times the prophets asked very hard questions about God’s seeming lack of involvement and justice in human affairs, even His power to save (*see, for example, Hab. 1:2, 3, 17; Jer. 14:9*). At times, it is natural to get upset with God and even to question Him. But what is the line between this and losing faith? Can a Christian still be a Christian and doubt?

A few years ago, in a cover article, *Time* magazine told how Mother Teresa, long an icon of practical spirituality and selflessness through her work among the poor of Calcutta, had a dark night of the soul that may have lasted 50 years, where she often questioned God’s presence. Esther reminds us that, even when God seems particularly absent and uninvolved in situations, “He is there, and He is not silent.” Discuss with the class ways we can keep and build our faith, especially when God seems very distant or even absent.

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: As Seventh-day Adventists, whose faith is based on God the Creator and Life-Giver, we are called to defend life. God placed Esther in her position at such a time in earth’s history in order to stop genocide. Standing up for life could have cost Esther her own life, and yet we remember her today, thousands of years later, because of her courage. Like Esther, we must stand up for life today. In the following activity, explore with your class practical ways they can help promote life.

Activity: As followers of Jesus, our ultimate hope is that people will be led to accept His gift of salvation and be ready for His return. But while we wait for that great day, we are called to be His representatives on earth. We have been placed in such a time as this, like Esther, to work for physical and eternal life. Have a brainstorming session with the class about practical ways you can be life-promoters. You may wish to think about things like caring for the lives of widows and orphans, helping those dying from AIDS, or helping to relieve poverty.