

The book of Esther

Esther and Mordecai

A call to speak up when you have something to say.

Deep inside you know something is not right. Should *you* say something? To whom? When? And what if others do not agree or do not want to hear? Perhaps you have been there. Mordecai became aware of a plot by some of the king's officials to kill him. Should he speak up? That would be dangerous. Queen Esther was informed about a well thought out plan by Haman to exterminate the Jewish people in the Persian empire. His plan was now law. No law of the Persians could not be changed or annulled. Should she speak up? Was it too late? This book of Esther has been written to remind us that our God is sovereign and in control of world affairs. We can trust in Him and need not live in fear. But it is also written to remind us that He coordinates 'coincidences' so that you and I are placed at the right time in the right place to speak or act on His behalf. Every year, in the month of Adar (February or March), the Jewish people now celebrate God's goodness and the initiative and courage of Esther and Mordecai with their feast of Purim.

1. The story

The Jewish great-grandparents of *Mordecai* were driven into exile by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. The mighty Persian empire then took over Babylon, extending itself from India to Ethiopia. In 483 BC the Persian king Xerxes (Ahasuerus in Hebrew) organized a 180 day event to bring together the nobles and princes of his vast empire. Historians suggest that the purpose of this gathering was to plan his ill-fated attack on Greece in 480 BC. The meeting included great celebrations. When his beautiful wife Vashti did not arrive when called, the king deposed her. That sparked the search for a new queen. Among the beautiful selected women was Esther. She was an orphan, brought up by her cousin Mordecai. The king had given permission for Jews to return to Jerusalem, and a number had already returned. Mordecai and his family, however, chose to remain in Susa, one of the 4 capital cities of the Persian empire which housed the king's winter palace.

There was some evidence of anti-Semitism in the empire, but not enough to hinder high ranking jobs for Jews like Daniel and Nehemiah. Mordecai had also landed a good job "at the king's gate" (2:19), the place where legal transactions took place and justice served. Also central in the book of Esther is Haman, a royal vizier to the king. Today we would probably label him a narcissist. Mordecai refuses to bow before him. Tension grows in the narrative as Haman seeks revenge. He manages to get the king to issue a decree "to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, women and little children, on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods" (3:13). On hearing this, Jews throughout the empire were devastated and called on their God. The extreme measure of this edict left the inhabitants of Susa "bewildered" (3:15). Mordecai informed Esther about this new law, and she approached the King. Haman was killed and a new decree was issued to allow the Jews to prepare to defend themselves. The book of Esther reads like a good story, with

suspense, intrigue, wickedness, irony, and valour. I recommend you read and enjoy the complete narrative in your own Bible! Apart from inspiring, it contains some important insights and lessons for us today .

2. But why me?

Perhaps you have seen, heard or become aware of some serious 'problem' in your family, church, your child's school, workplace or in the society you form part of. Why should you say something about it? Whistle-blowers are usually admired by the silent majority but put to death by a noisy and powerful minority. Why risk it? By speaking up you get involved. The name of God is not mentioned once in the book of Esther. At least not explicitly. In the Hebrew version Jews point out that the acronym for *Jehovah* is found four times (1:20, 5:4, 5:13, 7:7) and for *I-am-who-I-am* once (7:5). God's hand is clearly seen throughout the whole story: He ensures that Mordecai gets the right job, overhears the murderous conversation, has the right connections to be able to warn the king, and more. Why Mordecai? God's providential hand had placed him in the right place at the right time. Can you see evidence of God's providential hand in the preparation, developments or timing in your situation?

Should queen Esther plead for the Jews? Established custom did not permit anyone to enter the king's presence without being called (4:11). She was no exception. She had not been summoned in 30 days. She could doubt her adequateness for the task, thinking of herself as being too young, too inexperienced, not good at reading (4:8), an orphan, a foreigner, and just a woman. The king's inner court was a man's world. Why Esther? No angel spoke to her like unto Gideon and Mary. She had no God inspired dreams like Joseph and Paul. And yet God's providential hand was visible in her circumstances. Mordecai brought this to her attention: "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (4:14). We can always think of people who are better gifted and more experienced than ourselves. We can always imagine some better time. When God called Moses he replied, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Ex. 3:11). When God called Jeremiah, he objected "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child" (Jer. 1:6). When God calls, such objections are not expressions of humility.

Back in September 2018 I was invited by a rather liberal Christian TV programme here in The Netherlands [NieuwLicht café, EO] to participate in a public debate on homosexuality. It would be a two-hour event in a bar, chaired by Thijs van den Brink, and open to the public. The press would be present but it would not be filmed. 'Why me?' I asked. 'Because we needed someone to defend the traditional Biblical view' was the answer. While seeking the Lord's guidance as to what I should do I could think of many reasons why I was not the right person to do this: My Dutch is limited. I prefer to think at my desk, not in public. I've never done this before. They are probably looking for someone to frame as 'fundamentalist' and 'homophobe'. I slowly became aware that my main reason not to participate was 'fear'. The Lord does not call us to speak up because we are the best. Neither because our words alone will achieve His purposes. But He does use our willingness and does use our words. The next day they phoned again, and I said "yes, I'll be there".¹

3. Preparing your heart

King Ahasuerus was not a Jew neither a God-fearing king. Why should a Jew risk his life in order to protect him? Perhaps because being good, loyal and faithful are Godly virtues.

¹ <https://www.edestad.nl/lokaal/lokaal/110264/lhbt-tussen-gezag-en-liefde-482159?fromplista>

Perhaps because prophet Jeremiah encouraged Jews in exile to be responsible and engaged citizens: "Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jer. 29:7). If you have not prepared your heart to be a faithful witness for Jesus Christ, to stand up for what is right, to live by God's Word, it is very unlikely that you will feel the need to behave differently from those around you. You will be insensitive to the promptings of God's Spirit to act, to persevere or speak up. The attractive fruit of faithfulness requires deep roots.

Queen Esther grew up in the house of Mordecai. Moral character is often passed on to others through an attractive example of small loving and faithful daily acts. When Mordecai first asked her to approach the king to plead for the life to the Jews, she only saw the dangers and difficulties (4:9-11). This beautiful and delicate young lady was no natural hero. To risk your life, you must first prepare your heart. She thought it over. Then replied, "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (4:16). She was aware that not even with fasting could God be manipulated. Only after a heart decision has taken place, a decision to surrender to God's cause, will a willingness grow to risk everything for Him without bitterness. You see that radical surrender often in Scripture. We see this heart decision taking place at Gethsemane when Jesus prays, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Lk. 22:42). We see also the prophets risking their lives to proclaim unpopular God-given messages, Paul risking his life in dangerous travels, apostles willing to disobey the authorities in order to preach Christ. We could call this 'peaceful intelligent suicidal obedience'. This heart attitude can be found in the biographies of many North American and European 19th century missionaries as they moved with the gospel into Africa on one-way tickets. Many of them did perish. Without this preparation of heart, callings that involve physical danger or possible loss will be automatically dismissed.

4. Planning and adjusting

Mordecai took a great risk in exposing traitorous officials. If he shared the murderous plot with the wrong people he could be easily silenced. In fact, years later, that is precisely how king Ahasuerus died - assassinated by some of his officials in 465 BC. Mordecai thought carefully about this and chose to share the sensitive information with queen Esther who then reported to the king (2:22). You may have truth on your side, but that does not exempt you from acting with caution. Not everyone is a truth seeker or a truth lover. In fact, some are truth haters.

To speak to the king, queen Esther needed his approval. She was chosen by king Xerxes to be queen because of her beauty, so she puts on her royal robes and stands when he can see her. He extends his golden sceptre towards her. She may now approach the throne. Then the king asks, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you" (5:3). That was a very good start. She did not plead immediately for the safety of the Jews. She had thought out a plan. She had prepared a meal for three. "If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him" (5:4). In most situations, be it at church, school, work or government, there are established protocols. Your 'speaking up' may have a better chance of being effective if you first investigate *who* are responsible, who have the power to implement change, and seek advice on what is the best way to approach them. Often timing is important. Sometimes confrontation is required, sometimes diplomacy works best. Your objective is not to ventilate your indignation, anger or frustration but to trigger *positive change*. Moses did not instigate a

slave rebellion, he approached the Pharaoh. Daniel and Nehemiah also good examples of careful planning and diplomacy. Planning and following a plan will require something additional from you: patience, calmness, focus, flexibility and persistence. Queen Esther is here an inspiration for us.

5. Obsession and naivety

Wrong attitudes and expectations can add unnecessary burdens to your life of obedience. The first is an *obsession* with what needs correcting. This destructive attitude is evident in Haman, the enemy of the Jews. Haman is presented to us a rather obnoxious lover of status and power. When the king promoted him to a high rank, “elevating him and giving him a seat of honour higher than that of all the other nobles” (3:1), he expected that all would automatically bow down before him. But this did not happen spontaneously. The king had to explicitly command the people to do so (3:2). Haman delighted in such honour. But among the multitude in Susa who bowed down before him he spotted one man who did not do so. “When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour, he was enraged” (3:5). Haman was a very wealthy man. He had everything a man could desire. After enjoying the first banquet with the king and queen, “Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits... Calling together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, Haman boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honoured him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials... *But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate*” (5:9-13). The frustration he experienced by the behaviour of one man eclipsed all the other joys in his life. He became obsessed with his problem. This can also happen to a well-intended Christian. The sin, disorder or injustice that you see can become an obsession in your life. Don’t let this happen to you. Forget not your many blessings, the good and beautiful people and things God has placed around you.

The second source of unnecessary burden is *naivety*. One type of naivety is to expect other people to thank us. After Mordecai exposed the plot to kill the king, “the two officials were hanged on a gallows. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king” (2:23). Mordecai spoke up, told the truth, saved the king’s life and then it was quiet. Mordecai is forgotten. The following chapter begins with the honouring of Haman. If not careful, our unfulfilled expectations can become a source of deep frustrations or even bitterness. We humans are more prone to point out what is wrong than to celebrate what is good. We all suffer from that. It is so easy to say thank you, and yet we so easily forget. But the Lord does not forget. About five years later (2:16, 3:7), on the night before Haman was to ask the king to allow him to hang Mordecai, we see God’s providential hand moving: “That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king’s officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. What honour and recognition has Mordecai received for this? the king asked. Nothing has been done for him, his attendants answered” (6:1-3). That morning, in a special way, the king expressed his gratitude to Mordecai! Are you waiting for an expression of gratitude? Be realistic. Don’t be naïve. We all easily forget. We all sometimes take what others do for granted. But “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them” (Heb. 6:10). He rejoices in your faithfulness!

Another type of naivety is to expect the enemy to give up without fighting. It would be great if once the word of God was spoken, once the truth was made public, there would be repentance, forgiveness, change and harmony. But that is not how it normally works. Sometimes exposing

truth or standing for principle only intensifies the tension. The kickback can make us wonder if our calling to speak up was from God. Daniel's three friends were thrown into the fiery furnace because they refused to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's image (Dan. 3:20). But Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman affected all the Jews in the Persian empire. "Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes" (3:6). We human beings are interconnected with each other. For better or for worse, what one human does can affect the lives of many others. Evil men and women hit back at the innocent, your family and loved ones in order to divide those who expose them and kill your will to continue. When Moses and Aaron, sent by God, asked the Pharaoh "Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert", his reply was: "Lazy, that's what you are, lazy!... Now get to work. You will not be given any straw, yet you must produce your full quota of bricks" (Ex. 5:1-18). The work of all the Jews became heavier! If called, speak up. Do so carefully. And be prepared for a possible kickback. Do not allow yourself to be absorbed with what is wrong. Do not expect expressions of gratitude or victory without a fight. This realism frees us from unnecessary burdens.

6. Discouraged and considering giving-up

Some moral, theological, interpersonal and ideological conflicts can go on for years. Perhaps you or only a few people see or know about the problem. The task ahead is daunting. The little impact is disheartening. You feel marginalized and often alone. You are seriously considering giving up. Perhaps you know that many are aware of the problem but don't seem to care. It doesn't affect them directly or they've learnt to live with it. Their lack of concern and passivity frustrates you. You notice that you are becoming negative and bitter. Is it now time to pull back and stop? Can you imagine the great burden on the shoulders of Mordecai? The lives and future of all the Jews now seem to rest on his shoulders! That way of thinking would have driven Mordecai to despair. But he knew that the Jews were not his but God's people! Read carefully what Mordecai says to Esther: "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" (4:14). Mordecai recognized his and Esther's responsibility to act but such responsibility was firmly nested in the knowledge of God's sovereignty. God had made an unconditional promise to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:1-8). He knew that God would never abandon His people. If queen Esther would not act, there would be real consequences but the future of the Jews was God's responsibility, not theirs. Do you see how important this is? How could knowledge of God's sovereignty affect the way you see your children, parents, church, study, work, society... and the dilemma or struggle you are currently involved in?

That interaction between God's sovereignty and our responsibility to speak or act is the Biblical framework for our life and ministry. Moses led the people of Israel, but he was aware they were God's people. Noah built the ark, but God brought the animals and closed the door. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego remained faithful to God's word, but God determined if they would live or burn (Dan. 3:16-18). Young David faced Goliath, convinced "that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands" (1Sam 17:47). Never forget dear sister, dear brother, it is the Lord's battle and we are only soldiers in His army. Dwelling on the reality of God's sovereignty does not need to lead to passive fatalism. Knowledge of the reality of God's sovereignty is given us to help us faithfully serve the Master without that crushing burden of responsibility! Believers preached the gospel to a lost world, knowing that Christ Himself is building up His church. When they faced

opposition, “they raised their voices together in prayer to God. *Sovereign Lord*, they said... Herod and Pontius Pilate... They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness” (Acts 4:23-29). Is your discouragement caused by tiredness or exhaustion? Try to look at the challenge you face through the lens of God’s sovereignty. Don’t carry more than what the Lord requires of you. If you conclude that the Lord is calling you to pursue the matter, keep on going. “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9). And as you labour, consciously share every burden with Him (Mat. 11:28-30). Otherwise the weight of responsibility may crush you!

7. Criticism and division

As you read commentaries on the book of Esther you will notice how Mordecai and Esther are praised but also criticized. Mordecai, for example, is criticized for seeking his personal wellbeing in Persia and not joining those Jews who returned to Jerusalem to rebuild it. He is criticized for seeking to control the life of his younger cousin Esther and for using her position as queen to advance his own status in the empire. Esther is criticized for making use of her physical beauty, for adapting too much to the Persian culture (in contrast with Daniel and his friends who requested not to defile themselves with the king’s food) and for being too vindictive (9:13). There could be some truth in these criticisms. After all, both Mordecai and Esther were fallen human beings just like you and me. If others were to look closely at your life and mine, I am sure they could find something to criticize. What I find so encouraging is that our Lord has chosen to do His work on earth through imperfect people! Therefore He can also work through you and me! Aaron, Mozes’ brother, was chosen by God to be the High Priest – and yet he was the one who built the golden calf which the Israelites worshiped. Jonah was chosen by God to be the first international missionary – and yet he struggled with attitude problems. King David was used by God to write many of Israel’s worship songs – and yet he was a man with moral failures. Peter was given a key role by Christ in His church – and yet he was very impulsive and denied the Lord. Of course, our Lord desires that we strive to live holy lives. He wants to see the fruit of the Spirit grow in our life. When we fail, He seeks repentant hearts. With Him there is grace, there is forgiveness, there is a new opportunity. That said, I have noticed that every active servant and ministry will at some point be criticized by somebody. I have also learnt that most criticism has an element of truth. Ask the Lord to let you know what part of the criticism you need to take to heart. Discard the rest. Be warned, fighting criticism consumes a lot of energy. Allow the Master to defend His own servants. If we are humble, every criticism (friendly and aggressive) can be used by the Lord to help us grow and develop. Learn from criticism. Do not let it depress or paralyze you.

The feast of Purim: When choosing a date to exterminate the Jews, Haman followed Persian superstition and “cast the *pur* (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction” (9:24). Casting the lot would be like throwing dice. It fell on the 13th day of Adar. Through Esther’s intervention, on the day in which Haman had hoped to exterminate the Jews, the Jews were allowed to defend themselves and destroy their enemies. This they did successfully. The following day, the 14th, the Jews rested and celebrated throughout the length and breadth of the Persian empire. They called this celebration *Purim*, from the Persian word *pur* with a Hebrew plural ending (9:26). The Jews in Susa fought one day more, and rested and celebrated on the 15th day (9:16-19). When Mordecai commanded the Jews to turn the victory celebration into an annual feast, the rural Jews who lived in the villages wanted Purim to be celebrated on the 14th and those in Susa on the 15th day of Adar. Serious disunity arose among the Jews. Disagreements may arise in the heat of battle. They can also arise after victory. The polarization is most often over

important but non-essential elements. Be careful, such division in the ranks weakens and discourages. It was eventually agreed to celebrate Purim yearly during both days (9:28). To promote unity and bring the matter to rest, Mordecai and queen Esther found it necessary to send a second letter “to establish these days of Purim at their designated times” (9:29-30). To work effectively together we need unity on the fundamentals. We need to know and agree what those fundamentals are. You have probably also noticed how easy it is to turn every sincerely held difference into something fundamental. Remain focussed! Perfection only comes in heaven.

8. Shine like a star

Esther’s Hebrew birth name was Hadassah. A large Medical Centre in Jerusalem has been called after her. Esther is her Persian name and it means ‘star’. She definitely shone like a star in those difficult times! We also are to “shine like stars” (Phil. 2:15). The darker the sky, the brighter a star shines. The Lord Jesus sees His people as lights in a dark world. “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men...” (Mat. 5:14-16). We are not called to complain about how dark the night is. We are not supposed to fear the darkness, neither get depressed because of it. Neither should we hide. We are called to shine! As we look around us we see people celebrating their right to abort their babies, we see social injustice, we see the aggressive intolerance of the new gender-ideology, the disintegration of the traditional family unit, intolerance and persecution of fellow Christians, the growing censoring power of Big Tech, the careless damaging of our planet... the darkness we see around us can feel overwhelming! After 15 years of happily focussed Bible teaching and church planting in Colombia, we moved as a family to The Netherlands. My growing awareness of some of these mega-problems feels sometimes like a heavy darkness. What kind of society are we passing on to our children and grandchildren? What kind of gospel? What kind of church? What can little ‘me’ do? I do notice that I am encouraged and inspired when I see other people who speak up for what is true. Some of these are Christians, like John Lennox, Tim Keller, John Piper and Nancy Pearcey. Some Christian ‘stars’ of previous generations still shine, like C.S. Lewis, William Wilberforce, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I also find encouragement from non-Christians who, at a serious cost to themselves, are willing to speak up against aspects of the current gender-ideology, voices of people such as Douglas Murray², Jonathan Sacks³, Abigail Shrier⁴ and Jordan Peterson⁵. This last one wrote, “When you have something to say, silence is a lie – and tyranny feeds on lies”.

My sense of hopelessness and powerlessness tempts me to put my lamp under a bowl and walk away. It is true that we cannot do *everything*... but we can do *something*. And God knows that. Often during these last few years, my prayer has been “Lord, what would you have me do? What should my next step be?” Sometimes we need to calmly listen for the promptings of God’s Spirit, look for signs of God’s providential working in and around us, and wait until a small conviction begins to grow. A friend recently reminded me that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which *God prepared in advance for us to do*” (Eph. 2:10). Esther and Mordecai did not solve all the Persian empire’s problems.

² Author of ‘The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity’, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, UK, 2019.

³ Author of ‘Morality, Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times’, Hodder & Stoughton, UK, 2020.

⁴ Writer for the *Wall Street Journal*. Author of ‘Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters’. Regnery Publishing, 2020.

⁵ Author of ‘12 Rules for Life – An Antidote to Chaos’. Penguin Random House UK. 2018. Pg. 91.

Not even all the Jewish' problems. But they did carry out the good work which He had prepared in advance for them to do. I find that encouraging!

Back in 1962 the well-known theologian Karl Barth was asked if he could summarize his whole life's work in theology in a sentence. He replied, "Yes, I can. In the words of a song I learned at my mother's knee: *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*" Sometimes there is depths and power in simplicity - if we take the time to see it. This song was written by Anna Warner. Anna's sister, Susan Warner, wrote another well-loved children's song, first published in 1868. It is a song queen Esther could have sung for us. Read it slowly with an adult mind. Digest it. God can speak to your soul and call you into action through it. It goes like this.⁶

1. Jesus bids us shine, With a pure, clear light,
Like a little candle, Burning in the night.
In this world is darkness, So let us shine--
You in your small corner, And I in mine.

2. Jesus bids us shine, First of all for Him;
Well He sees and knows it, If our light grows dim;
He looks down from heaven, To see us shine--
You in your small corner, And I in mine.

3. Jesus bids us shine, Then, for all around
Many kinds of darkness, In this world are found -
Sin, and want, and sorrow; So we must shine,
You in your small corner, And I in mine.

Conclusion

We are told that the tomb of Mordecai and queen Esther is located in Hamadan, Iran (Declared a World Heritage Site in 2008). Their bodies have been lying in rest there for close to two and a half millennia. In that time the world has changed significantly. Leaders, governments, empires and ideologies have come and gone. And yet this story of God's sovereignty and human responsibility still speaks, inspires and comforts many of us today. What Susan Warner wrote 150 years ago still holds today: Around us are many kinds of darkness. Jesus still bids us shine with a pure, clear light. If we have something to say, let's speak up. You in your small corner and I in mine.

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Source: www.philipnunn.com

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJwsRCBTd0g>