

Esther and Mordecai



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Dan. 1:1–12; Dan. 6:1–9; Esther 2:1–10, 20; Esther 3:1–15; Esther 4:1–14; Esther 9:1–12.*

Memory Text: “‘I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth’ ” (*Isa. 49:6, NRSV*).

One of the most inspiring accounts of “cross-cultural ministry” in the Bible can be found in the book of Esther. A great deal has been written over the millennia about this book, and to this day many Jews celebrate the feast of Purim, based on Esther 9:26–31.

Esther and Mordecai, her cousin, were Jews living in the capital of the Persian Empire, Susa. For whatever reason, unlike other Jews who had returned to Judah, they, along with others, remained in the land of their captivity.

Then, through a series of providences, Esther becomes queen. “The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins; so he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti” (*Esther 2:17, NKJV*).

It was in this role that Esther, even if somewhat reluctantly, was able to play a major part in biblical history. In its own unique way, this story shows how God’s people, even in foreign environments, can witness for truth.

Whatever your time allows, read (or skim through) the book of Esther for this week’s study.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 23.

Captive in a Foreign Culture

It is never easy to be expatriated to a foreign culture. It may be difficult for us today to comprehend what the Jews faced, first under the Babylonians and then the Persians.

None of us, for instance, lives in an Adventist country where the principles of our faith are, to some degree, the law of the land. But before being deported, the Jewish people had been living in their own country, where the principles of their faith were also enshrined in the law of the land.

On one level, think how easy that should have made it to be faithful to God. After all, how much easier would it be to keep the seventh-day Sabbath if, in fact, keeping the seventh-day Sabbath were enshrined in the legal codes of the nation?

On the other hand, sacred history has shown us that whatever the decrees of the land happen to be, even if favorable to faith, faithfulness must stem from the heart, from within, or else sin, apostasy, and ruin will surely follow.

“ ‘Therefore the Lord said: ‘Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me, and their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men’ ” (*Isa. 29:13, NKJV*).

In contrast, for those who are determined to be faithful, even the most unfavorable environment cannot keep them from obedience.

Read Daniel 1:1–12, Daniel 3:1–12, and Daniel 6:1–9. However unique each situation, what do these accounts reveal about the challenges God’s people can face living in a foreign culture?

No matter who we are, or where we live, we are immersed in an environment that to some degree, either by laws themselves or by the culture, or both, can be greatly challenging to our faith and our witness. These accounts in Daniel, though always ending “happily,” reveal that even under trying circumstances people can stay faithful to God. Even if none of these accounts had turned out well, there’s no doubt these men still did the right thing.

What are some of the challenges to your faith that you face in your own culture? How do you respond to them?

In a Foreign Court

Eventually, after the fall of Babylon and the rise of Medo-Persia, many of the Jews returned to their ancestral lands. But not all returned. Some remained where they had been living for a generation or more.

With this background in mind, we have a bit of the context for the story of Esther. “In those days when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the citadel” (*Esther 1:2, NKJV*). Here is where the biblical narrative unfolds, the Persian Empire under this king.

In chapter 1, queen Vashti falls out of favor with the king, which leads him to look for another queen, one to replace the now-disfavored Vashti. It’s in this context that Esther and her cousin, Mordecai, first appear.

Read Esther 2:1–9. What do these verses teach us about the situation of Mordecai and Esther?

It seems that Mordecai, as a royal officer, was sitting at the gate of the palace and was residing in the city of Shushan with his adopted daughter, or cousin, Esther. Because of their position and living where they did, they were immersed in the Persian culture. This must be at least part of the reason Esther was chosen to be presented to the king: “Esther also was taken to the king’s palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem” (*Esther 2:8, NIV*).

Read Esther 2:10, 20. What was going on here, and why would Mordecai give her such a command?

Though the text does not say precisely why, it’s not hard to guess. As aliens in a foreign culture and religion that, we will see, could be hostile, they were wise in keeping silent about their family and people.

What circumstances might you think of where it could be prudent not to be overt about our faith? Or should we never do that? And if not, why not?

Mordecai's Faithful Witness

Living as they were in a foreign land, sooner or later Mordecai and Esther, if they were to remain faithful to God, might have run into trouble. This, certainly, became the case for Mordecai.

Read Esther 3:1–15. What happened here, and why?

In Esther 3, we learn that King Xerxes (Ahasuerus) honored Haman and gave him a high position full of power. Everyone was told they must bow down before Haman. But we read: “Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor” (*Esther 3:2, NIV*). The Bible does not give the reason that Mordecai did not kneel before this man. But we know why. He is a faithful Jew. Mordecai is not willing to pay homage to a descendant of Agag, an Amalekite, enemies of his people since the Exodus (*Deut. 25:19*). How could a faithful Jew kneel down before an Amalekite? Or, for that matter, worship anyone but the Lord?

“Then the king’s servants who were within the king’s gate said to Mordecai, ‘Why do you transgress the king’s command?’” (*Esther 3:3, NKJV*). Though we don’t know in detail how he responded, the next verse says that “Mordecai had told them that he was a Jew” (*Esther 3:4, NKJV*). Surely in that response, Mordecai had an opportunity to explain that as a worshiper of the God who created the heavens and the earth, he could not worship any sinful human being. No doubt Mordecai was to some degree able to witness about his faith, a faith that he adhered to so strongly that it endangered himself and, unfortunately, others.

“From Daniel and his companions and Mordecai, a bright light shone amid the moral darkness of the kingly courts of Babylon.”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 13, 1884.

When Haman wanted to destroy the Jewish people, describing them as “ ‘a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king’s laws’ ” (*Esther 3:8, NIV*). A people whose customs are different and who do not obey the king’s laws? A perfect recipe for persecution.

What are ways, even now, that we might be tested as was Mordecai? How should we respond?

For Such a Time as This

Read Esther 4:1–14. Why was it considered at this moment appropriate for Esther to identify herself as a Jew?

When Mordecai contacted Esther for her help, she had been married to Ahasuerus for several years, but there was a law in Persia that no one could come to the king's throne without an express invitation from the king. Anyone who didn't respect this rule risked death. Esther, knowing the risk, went to the throne room anyway, uninvited.

Mordecai's faith sought to awaken Esther's faith. The heart of the book of Esther is found in Mordecai's words to Esther: "And Mordecai told them to answer Esther: 'Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' " (*Esther 4:13, 14, NKJV*).

Esther's faith was put to the test as Mordecai appealed to her love for her people. No one knew she was Jewish except Mordecai, and once she made the decision to become involved, she did not hesitate to put her life on the line.

Her faith in God was strong, and she knew that without God's help she could not succeed. Her answer to Mordecai revealed her faith: " '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 attendants 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' " (*Esther 4:16, NIV*). Mordecai sent this information to the entire Jewish community in Shushan (Susa), and while they fasted and prayed, Esther prepared herself for the dangerous moment. "On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter" (*Esther 5:1, 2, NIV*).

For the Jews in such a situation as described above, prayer would certainly accompany fasting. That is, though they acted in their own behalf, prayer was central to their response. What obvious lesson can we take from this?

The Miracle of Purim

Commentators for millennia have noticed that God’s name does not appear in the book of Esther. This is the only biblical book where such a phenomenon occurs. However, the Jews were able to recognize God’s actions in the great deliverance made for them, and this book was selected by God’s people to be included in the canon of the Bible.

Are we able to discover the presence of God beneath the surface of our daily life? God’s actions can take the appearance of normal, natural events, and if we don’t pay careful attention to them, we will not notice God’s presence.

Read Esther 9:1–12. What was the result of Esther’s effort?

The miracle of Purim takes a very unusual form. The miracle is hidden, disguised in apparently natural events. The law to destroy the Jews was not reversed, but a new law was written, allowing the Jews to defend themselves.

Also, notice what else had happened, and how God was able to work through these events. The Persians noticed God’s actions on behalf of the Jews.

And the result?

“Many people of other nationalities became Jews” (*Esther 8:17, NIV*). This is a great example of how the Lord was able to work to bring lost souls to a knowledge of Him.

The leaders of the Jewish people recognized the working of God. When the Jews were victorious in defending themselves, they declared a yearly time (called Purim) in remembrance and celebration of their victory. These days are still traditionally spent in thanksgiving to God in remembrance of His deliverance.

Challenge: Pray that God will give you the courage to share something He has done for you with one of the people on your prayer list this week.

Challenge Up: Begin a diary or journal of special little things (or big things) that God does for you. Review it and pray that God will bring these things to your mind at just the right time so you can share them with someone.

Further Thought: “To every household and every school, to every parent, teacher, and child upon whom has shone the light of the gospel, comes at this crisis the question put to Esther the queen at that momentous crisis in Israel’s history, ‘Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?’ Esther 4:14.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 263.

“Esther was a beautiful Jewish girl, cousin of Mordecai, who took her into his home after her parents died, and loved her as his own daughter. God used her to save the Jewish people in the land of Persia.” (Note: This second paragraph above is introductory material included about Esther in *Daughters of God* on page 45 and was not written by Ellen White. However, the two subsequent quotations below were written by her.)

“In ancient times the Lord worked in a wonderful way through consecrated women who united in His work with men whom He had chosen to stand as His representatives. He used women to gain great and decisive victories. More than once, in times of emergency, He brought them to the front and worked through them for the salvation of many lives. 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 the 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. This many have been doing and are still ready to do.”—Ellen G. White, *Daughters of God*, pp. 45, 46.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 The book of Esther does leave us with some unanswered questions, particularly concerning Esther’s role in the court of the king, even though she was elevated to the role of queen. How do we reconcile these things with her faith, or can we?
- 2 The famous words of Esther, “ ‘and if I perish, I perish!’ ” (*Esther 4:16, NKJV*), have echoed down through the millennia as an example of faithfulness even in the face of death. How do her words reflect what God’s people will face in the last days, when the issues in Revelation 13 become a reality?
- 3 In class, go over the question, at the end of Monday’s study, about not revealing your faith at times. Should that ever be the case for us?

Dreaming Dreams: Part 2

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Since childhood, Joseph Delamou had gone to church daily and, following his father's example, knelt before images. But he had a vivid dream when he asked God if he was going to the right church. He sensed that God was calling him to leave his father's church.

So, 16-year-old Joseph joined another church in Conakry, capital of the French-speaking country of Guinea in West Africa. He soon became its youth leader, and he organized numerous outreach programs.

Several years passed, and Joseph's father grew increasingly displeased with his son for going to another church. "I want you to learn English," he said. "You need to give up your church activities and focus on English."

Joseph was reluctant to stop going to church. But to make Father happy, he quit the outreach programs and enrolled in English lessons at the age of 23.

The English teacher, Fortunate Kaloubilori, opened the first lesson with the words, "Let's pray." Joseph was astonished. He had thought that he was giving up God to learn English, but the teacher prayed at every lesson.

Three weeks into the lessons, the teacher asked Joseph for help. "I have many papers to grade," Fortunate said. "Please, could you stay and help?"

After grading the papers, Fortunate invited Joseph to study the Bible with him. Joseph was pleased. He thought, *God is following me everywhere!*

But the Bible study left him confused. He had left his father's church to join another church. But now he was hearing new Bible teachings that seemed to lead to Fortunate's church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

"This is because of my father," Joseph told himself, bitterly. "If he hadn't sent me to these lessons, I wouldn't have these problems."

He continued Bible studies for two months and then went to his pastor for advice. He wanted to know which church was right. The pastor dismissed the Adventists as incorrect.

"Don't listen to them," he said.

Joseph asked for a meeting with the pastor and Fortunate to discuss the Bible. The pastor refused to come and sent representatives. When the representatives failed to support their views from the Bible, the pastor demanded a second meeting. But again, he sent representatives whose answers didn't satisfy Joseph.

Joseph decided to pray and fast for three days about what to do. Then he had another dream.



Your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on December 30 will help spread the gospel in the West-Central Africa Division, which includes Guinea. Thank you for planning a generous offering. Read more about Joseph and Fortunate (pictured) next week.

Part I: Overview

The book of Esther is unique for several reasons. One of those reasons is the lack of an explicit reference to God. Nowhere is God mentioned in the entire narrative's sequence—not by the Jewish characters, the story's heroes, nor by the non-Jewish characters. And yet, despite this oddity, the book contains valuable wisdom for those who follow Jesus and desire to share their experience with God in a world where many are not open to explicit expressions of faith.

Often when people in the church think about or discuss mission, they focus on explicit faith-oriented actions, such as evangelistic meetings, distribution of faith-based literature, Bible studies, or other forms of outreach. These things require a certain level of freedom and connection to a community to foster any meaningful transformation. But what about places where government doesn't allow faith-based activities? What about areas where people are entirely uninterested in such activities? Often the church ignores such settings. But places that fit this description make up a substantial portion of the world's population. This week, through the lens of Esther and Mordecai, we will see that God desires us to be creative in our witness, even in places and spaces that are not open to overt mission work.

Part II: Commentary

The story of Esther and Mordecai, much like the stories of Daniel and Joseph, is a reminder to the followers of God that they do not need to be pastors or religious leaders to serve the mission of God. These stories are in Scripture to demonstrate that through public service, government officials, and other government agencies, the people of God can serve and impact society in such a way that they draw people toward the love of God.

In the case of Esther and Mordecai, they were able to save the lives of thousands of people by being faithful to the values and wisdom passed on to them through their Jewish ancestors. Often when we read biblical stories, we gloss over the details, not always recognizing the intensity presented in some of the situations, as in the case of Esther and Mordecai. What Esther and Mordecai faced was an extraordinarily stressful and precarious situation. For them, preaching sermons or involving themselves in direct missional activity would not have served the larger mission of God, which was to draw people into loving relationships. What was needed was the courage to stand for life in

the face of death. They took this stand in a context in which they were part of a minority group, underappreciated in the empire. Yet, through God's influence and the willingness of Esther and Mordecai to make wise decisions in connection with God's overall plan for humanity, the queen and her adoptive father were able to be a blessing to people and to be part of a moment in history that was passed down via the pages of the Bible and the practice of the festival of Purim (*Esther 9:18–32*).

Many people reading this Bible study guide are living in places where they have significant religious freedom and do not have to worry about their lives being threatened if they reveal their faith. Others around the world do not have this luxury. Numerous followers of Jesus currently live in situations where an open adherence to God would land them in prison or endanger their lives and the lives of their families. Despite this danger, some of these people actively work in places of influence. God calls them to live out their faith in ways that may not seem like mission to many of us. It's possible that the best way for these people to serve God is to avoid openly expressing their faith. Instead, their quiet work in the background impacts how people are treated, helping them to flourish. This work is no less important than the explicit gospel presentations that others make in situations in which they have more freedom. The courage required to stay faithful in situations in which you cannot do so openly is often demonstrably remarkable. Only in the new earth will we know the impact that such people have had on countless lives worldwide.

There is another missional lesson to be learned from the story of Esther and Mordecai. Neither Esther nor Mordecai were trained theologians or trained pastors. They were regular people who had come to be in positions that were significant within the empire of the day (*Esther 2:7*). Little did they know how vital their roles would be. What is clear from the story is that both Esther and Mordecai worked and lived with a sense of integrity (*Esther 2:19–23; Esther 4:15, 16*). Despite the challenges that life threw at them, they remained dedicated workers for God and developed reputations for their diligence and honesty (*Esther 6*). As a result, when the activities of people around them (specifically Haman and his minions) conspired against them, their reputations became crucial to their survival.

If either Esther or Mordecai had not habitually been responsible people who served those around them with integrity, the story would have been very different. Their integrity gave them the platform from which to ask for favors and speak openly when it was a matter of life and death (*Esther 5:8; Esther 7:3, 4*). And they were not only heard at that moment, but they were also listened to (*Esther 8*).

Herein lies the lesson for us today. Most followers of Jesus are not official employees of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Even fewer

occupy such positions as a pastor, teacher, or chaplain. Yet, according to the story of Esther and Mordecai, it is often not the official workers who have the most significant amount of influence in a community. Usually, the average church member, who may work in secular businesses or for a civil service entity, has the greatest missional potential. We must never underestimate the role our relationships with people may have in the long run. The history of the mission of God is full of stories, many untold, that resemble Esther and Mordecai's. While most followers of Jesus may not be in such high-profile positions as Esther and Mordecai were, they are still in places and spaces to which pastors and other people employed by the church have no access.

In those spaces and places, a person's reputation for maintaining a high level of integrity and carefulness on the job will draw people to him or her in relationships of respect that create the possibilities for numerous influential opportunities. Sometimes explicit references to God are not what is needed to draw people toward the life that God desires for all humanity. It is essential to remind ourselves of this reality and remind the people around us, as well.

If a person were to tally up all the stories in the Bible about faithful followers of God, they would be surprised at how many of the stories are about everyday people living out their faith in everyday settings. The Bible demonstrates that God's mission is for all people and that any person can be a participant in that mission. It does not necessarily require that a person leave behind his or her career in a field other than church work. In fact, in most cases, what is needed is for more people to see their existing places of work as their mission field. This understanding does not always require that they explicitly evangelize their coworkers. It often means that they work with honesty and integrity, allowing the relationships that come from such an approach to blossom naturally. There is a high chance that the people who implement such an approach will periodically find themselves in situations that require courage and decisions that have an impact far beyond themselves. Living in a relationship with God will prepare them for such situations.

Part III: Life Application

The church must pray regularly for those who live in places where an open adherence to their faith is dangerous. The church should pray that God will give those in such places the courage to live out their faith through appropriate expressions in their given settings. The church should regularly intercede at the throne of grace for those who are in situations

without freedom, praying that somehow, through their influence, they may get a glimpse of the love of God and the life God wants for all humanity. Setting aside a week each month in the church for more intentional prayer along these lines would be very valuable.

Together we need to creatively encourage all followers of God who are not official church employees. We need to recognize their service through the different avenues of influence they have. The church also should invest in training that focuses on helping church members see how their work can be missional without necessarily requiring explicit witnessing. The General Conference has resources and personnel who have thought explicitly about, and practiced, “tentmaking” approaches in mission, who may serve as contact persons for such training. Prayerfully considering in more intentional ways how the members, in their regular jobs, can be mission-oriented would drastically change how the gospel would spread around the world.

Notes
