

## BIBLE STUDY: ESTHER

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ANTI-TRAFFICKING

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Get ready to meet one of the Bible's most courageous women. May her 'once upon a time' story inspire you to believe you too have been called 'for such a time as this' (Esther 4:14).

It has been said Esther is a historical Cinderella. She went from poverty to wealth, servant to heroine, injustice to amends. Her story, told in the biblical book of the same name, begins in 460 BC, over 100 years after her ancestors were taken into captivity from Israel and exiled to Babylon. It is based in Susa, the capital city of the ancient Persian empire (now Iran).

The Plot:

- King Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes I) had banished his wife, Queen Vashti, from the court for disobeying his orders to parade in front of his friends.
- To find a new queen, a royal decree is issued for all beautiful young virgins to be brought to the palace.
- Among these is Esther, a Jewish orphan living with her cousin Mordecai. Esther finds favour with the king and is chosen as the new queen, although she keeps her Jewish identity a secret.
- Mordecai, a Jewish leader, uncovers a sinister plot by Haman, one of the king's advisers, to annihilate all the Jews in the empire.
- Mordecai tells Esther to use her position as queen to intervene and save their people. Esther chooses to take personal and political action.
- Dramatically, Esther exposes Haman's heinous scheme and convinces the king to spare the Jews.
- She also bravely reveals her Jewish identity and pleads for mercy on behalf of her people.

Interestingly, God is not explicitly mentioned in the book, but he is undoubtedly at work.

The book of Esther is often read as a celebration of a beautiful and clever heroine who becomes queen – but we must also read the first part of the story revealing the forced movement of Jews from their homeland and the trafficking of women and girls to the king's palace. Esther was responsible for saving the lives of her people, but as well as being displaced herself she was trafficked into the harem in the king's palace.

*When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. (Esther 2:8)*



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## Read Esther 2:1-8

Young women, including Esther, were taken from their homes across King Ahasuerus' empire – anywhere between India and Ethiopia – transported to Susa and kept in his palace. The king's search for a new queen has sometimes been referred to as a beauty contest, so what's the big deal? A beauty contest, where you live in great comfort and wealth, get pampered 24/7, and have the chance of being chosen queen – that surely doesn't sound so bad?

But read verse 14: *'In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.'*

Many of the young women must have felt used and rejected, and they faced a life of enforced insecurity as a concubine, unable to get married or have the chance to raise a family.

### Discuss:

1. Queen Vashti was banished due to her refusal to parade herself in front of the king's friends. How much have attitudes changed regarding the objectification of women?
2. How do you think Esther felt when she was taken to the palace? How would you have felt?
3. How does the story reflect the ongoing practice of the trafficking of women for the pleasure and benefit of those in power?
4. People today – men, women and children – are trafficked across borders, sold for sex and enslaved as sex workers. What can we do to help deter this horrific crime?

## Read Esther 4:1-14

Esther is chosen as queen and goes on to prevent a genocide of her people. Mordecai, her cousin and a leader among the Jews, tells her that she was possibly placed in her exact position 'for such a time as this', and that if she does not stand up for what is right, deliverance will rise from another place.

*'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)*



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Esther accomplished several things to change the fate of her people. To speak to the king, Esther had to break the law for which the penalty was death; to make her appeal to the king, Esther confessed she was a Jew; and Esther opposed Haman, the king's most powerful adviser.

The book of Esther shows how the courage of a trafficked woman saved a nation of people and how an unlikely heroine changed the course of history.

**Discuss:**

1. In what ways can you see that the Lord has placed you exactly where he wants you?
2. Are you using your position to advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves?
3. In what ways has God called you for 'such a time as this'?

**Prayer:**

Dear God,

We pray for those who are vulnerable to being exploited; those stepping out into the unknown, perhaps moving away from home, to a different country or culture; those who have been tricked by the sale of false hope and the promise of a better life ahead of them. We pray for a change of heart in the perpetrators of human trafficking. We ask for a miracle, that you would touch the hearts of those who enslave others. We pray that your light will break through their darkness, and they will turn from their ways, finding freedom from greed and violence. Amen.



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