

## **The Story – Chapter 20: *The Queen of Beauty and Courage***

### **Introduction**

This week is our second last week in the Old Testament and we look at Chapter 20 in *The Story*, the story of Esther. Like Daniel, this story describes the intrigue and conflict involved as the Jews live in foreign courts. One of the fascinating things about this book in the Bible – it is the only one that never explicitly mentions God. And yet we see God all over this story. If you'd like to go right to the source, the entire story of Esther is found in the biblical book of Esther, chapters 1-9.

### **Summary of Chapter 20 – The Queen of Beauty and Courage**

Zerubbabel finished building the second temple in Jerusalem in 516 BC, and the Jews who returned to their home continued building their lives in the Persian province of Judah. However, most Jews remained in the places to which they'd been exiled, including the family of a man named Mordecai. Our story begins with King Xerxes of Persia hosting a huge party, which his queen Vashti refuses to attend. Her refusal results in Xerxes banishing her and necessitates a search for a new queen.

Beautiful women throughout the kingdom auditioned, and one of them is a Jewish woman named Esther (who has been raised by her cousin Mordecai). Esther won everyone's heart, including the king's. Xerxes made Esther queen, but he did not know she was Jewish.

Soon after, Esther became queen, Mordecai learned of a plot to kill the king. He passed the news to Esther, and the plot was foiled. Xerxes' scribe recorded Mordecai's service in the annals of the king. However, the story has a villain. King Xerxes' right-hand man, Haman reveled in his high standing and enjoyed having all the other royal officials kneel to him. When Mordecai refused, Haman was enraged. To exact his revenge, Haman deceived the king into issuing a decree to exterminate Mordecai and his people, the entire Jewish population of Persia.

Mordecai sent word to Esther asking her to beg the king for mercy on behalf of the Jewish people. Mordecai argued that she too would be destroyed and that God may have placed her as queen for a time such as this. Overcoming her fear, Esther spoke to the king. Ultimately it was Haman who ended up dying, instead of Mordecai (as Haman had planned). And while Xerxes could not repeal his original edict declaring the destruction of the Jews, he did allow the Jews to defend themselves.

Jews to this day celebrate this turn of events in the feast of Purim.

### Discussion Questions

1. What life lessons does Haman teach us about pride, self-centeredness, and hatred?
2. Queen Esther was willing to risk her life to save her people. Can you think of a time when you took a risk to do what was right?
3. Esther is not the first Hebrew that God positioned in a place of influence to be a source of deliverance for God's people. Who are some other deliverers we have studied in *The Story* and what common threads connect Queen Esther's story to theirs?
4. Although God is not actually mentioned in the book of Esther, can you think of some ways God worked invisibly throughout the book? Are there times in your own life when God worked behind the scenes to accomplish God's purposes? Looking back, how do you know it was God working?
5. Think of some of the major characters in this story: King Xerxes, Esther, Mordecai, and Haman. What motivates their behavior? In what power do they trust and root their identities? What traits do you have in common with the characters in this story? What motivates your behavior? In what is your identity rooted?
6. Once again, there is a lot of violence in this story – and the celebration of that violence is again disconcerting. How do you come to grips with a God who seems to encourage this violence, in light of what you know of Jesus in the New Testament?
7. This story of the attempt to eradicate the entire Jewish population was not the first time other nations have moved against the Jews; nor was it the last. Acts of anti-Semitism have gone on for centuries, many perpetrated by people who call themselves "Christian". What steps can we take to counter anti-Semitism in our own communities?
8. The book of Esther is read every year as part of the festival of Purim, celebrating God's deliverance of God's people. Where have we seen other examples of God's deliverance as we've read *The Story*? Where have you seen examples of God's deliverance in your own life?
9. What questions came up for you while you were reading these chapters?