

Esther: Beautiful and Brave

by Joelee Chamberlain

Today I thought it would be fun to talk about a beautiful queen! But there are a very bad man and a king in the story, too. Would you like to hear it? All right, I'll tell it to you.

Well, the story starts a little while before the beautiful young woman becomes a queen. This story takes place during the time that the Persians were ruling much of the world, including the land of Israel and the Jews. Of course, this means that it was after all of the kings of Judah and Israel were gone, after Judah and Israel had both been conquered and the people carried away as captives. Do you remember why that had happened; why the Lord had allowed His special people, the Jews, to be carried away from their land as captives? Yes, it was because many, many of the Jews and their kings had been worshipping idols and doing many wicked things. This story even happens a little while after the time of Daniel who had been one of the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had been carried away as a captive to Babylon. (But this story happened several hundred years before Jesus came to earth.)

Well, do you remember that the Lord had promised that the kingdom of Judah would only be away from their own land for 70 years? So then, since God always keeps His promises, at the end of that 70 years, Cyrus, the king of Persia, had let as many of the Jews who wanted to, go back to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the city and rebuild the temple of God that Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed 70 years before. So many of the Jews had gone back to the land of Israel. Remember, Ezra and Nehemiah had encouraged the Jews to do this rebuilding of the city and temple. But all of the Jews hadn't gone back, so there were still many, many Jews left scattered around in Persia all over the great, big Persian empire.

Well, later another man was king of Persia, and he's the king in our story today. This Persian king's name was Ahasuerus. Isn't that a funny name?! A-ha-su-er-us! Anyway, after Ahasuerus had been king for a few years, he decided to have a great big feast, a big party, for all of the many, many important men who ruled his empire for him. So he had this big party. And Ahasuerus showed the men all of his great riches and how important he was. The party lasted for many months, about half a year! That was some party, wasn't it?!

At the end of that time the king held a big feast for lots and lots of people who were in the palace. This feast was held for 7 days! It was held in the courtyard garden of the king's palace, and, oh, everything was so beautiful! Why there were hangings of white and green and blue, and the hangings were fastened with fancy cords to silver rings! There were marble pillars. (Marble is a lovely kind of colored stone that can be used to build buildings or be carved into statues.) And the floor of the courtyard was made of slabs of marble in all sorts of colors, red marble and blue marble and white marble and black marble. Doesn't that all sound fancy and beautiful?! During this party the men were out there feasting in this beautiful courtyard garden with the king; and at the same time the queen, named Vashti, had a feast for the women inside the royal house. The men and women didn't have parties together. Imagine that?! But it wasn't the right thing to do in Persia at a big party like that. So Vashti and the women had their own party. And Vashti was very beautiful. But Vashti isn't the queen about whom our story is mostly going to be today.

Anyway, the feast went on for 7 days, and the men were eating and drinking, and the king evidently got a little drunk. Then King Ahasuerus told some of his high servants to have Queen Vashti to put on her royal robes and her crown and to come show all those men how beautiful she was. But Queen Vashti would not do this. The Bible doesn't tell us why she wouldn't do it, but how do you think King Ahasuerus liked that? He didn't! He got very, very angry. And the king said to his wisest men who knew the laws of the Persians, "What does the law say we can do to Queen Vashti because she wouldn't obey my command?"

One of the wise men said, "Why the queen hasn't just done wrong to you, O king, she has done wrong to everyone all over the empire. Why, all the other women will hear how the queen acted, and they won't want to honor their husbands, either. There will be a lot of trouble then."

The wise man said, "Our laws, the laws of the Persians and Medes cannot be changed. So why don't you send out a royal command that Vashti will no longer be the queen. That you will get another woman to be queen. That way when everyone hears that Vashti won't be queen anymore because she disobeyed the king, then the other wives in the kingdom will all give the proper honor to their husbands."

Well, King Ahasuerus and the other leaders thought that was a good idea, and that's just what the king did. He sent letters all over the whole kingdom that said that a man should rule his own household.

Then after a while, King Ahasuerus began thinking that he should get another queen. So his servants said to the king, "Why not send people out to look for beautiful young women who have never been married before. Bring some from all over your kingdom. Then the one you like the best will be the queen instead of Vashti." (And that's the last we hear of Vashti.)

Well, the king liked that idea, and that's what he did. He sent out to have many beautiful young women brought to him from all over the kingdom. Now, you see, in those days the kings had lots of wives, so all of those young women would then be wives of the king, but only the one he liked the best would be the queen. The others would just be wives, not queens.

Well, right there in the city where the king's palace was, was a man whose name was Mordecai (Mor-de-ki). Mordecai was a Jew, and remember, they had been carried away captive by Nebuchadnezzar many years before. Now, Mordecai, even though he was older, was the cousin to a girl whose mother and father had died. And Mordecai took her for his own daughter and raised her. Her name in Hebrew was Hadassah, but she is called by a Persian name, Esther, in this story. And Esther was very beautiful. So what do you think happened? Why, she was one of the young women who was taken to the king's palace to be one of his wives!

Well, lots of young women were taken to the king's palace to be his wives. And there was a house where they all lived, and there were servants to take care of them and to get them ready to meet the king. They were each to have a turn to meet the king and see if he would like her best and make her the queen.

There was a man who was in charge of all of these women, and this man liked Esther and gave

her 7 young women to be her servants and gave her lots of good things of her own. Now, Mordecai had told Esther not to tell anyone that she was a Jew, and she always did what Mordecai told her to do, since he was like a father to her. And Mordecai used to walk every day in front of the yard of the house for women so that he would know how Esther was doing.

Well, finally it was Esther's turn to meet the king. She didn't ask for anything special to take with her. She just took whatever was given to her. Everyone who worked with Esther really liked her. Well, guess what? The king liked Esther better than any of the other beautiful young women! And King Ahasuerus put the royal crown on Esther's head and made her to be queen!

Then the king made a great feast for his servants because he now had a new queen. And the king gave presents to a lot of people to celebrate.

Well, in the meantime, Mordecai would sit by the king's gate. People often would sit by the gate and talk about things that were going on. One day while Mordecai was sitting there, he heard two men talking. They were men who sort of guarded the gate. And for some reason these two men were very angry with the king and were plotting how to get hold of the king and do something to him. Well, Mordecai heard what they said, and Mordecai in some way told Esther about it, and Esther told the king what Mordecai had told her about this plan of the two men. The king looked into the matter, and he found out that this was true, and the king had the two men killed. And this was all written down in a book that the king had that told about what happened in his kingdom.

Now, there was a man in the Persian kingdom named Haman. The king made Haman to be very important. In fact, the king made Haman to be more important than the other important men. And the king commanded that everyone was to bow to Haman, almost to worship Haman. Well, Mordecai would sit at the king's gate with other men. The other men would all bow to Haman when he went by, but Mordecai didn't bow. (We aren't told in the Bible why he wouldn't bow, but it may have been because Mordecai was a Jew and he worshipped only the true God and knew that he shouldn't bow in that special way to anyone except the Lord God.) Well, each day the other men at the gate would say to Mordecai, "Why aren't you obeying the king's command to bow to Haman?" But Mordecai didn't pay any attention to them, and Mordecai had told the men that he was a Jew. Finally, they told Haman about it, how Mordecai wouldn't bow to him.

Do you think Haman is going to like that? No! When Haman saw that Mordecai wouldn't bow to him, Haman was very angry. And when Haman found out that Mordecai was a Jew, then Haman decided that he wouldn't just punish Mordecai, he would kill all of the Jews all over the whole great big Persian kingdom. He would kill Mordecai and all of the other Jews as well! Can you imagine that?! But that's what he decided to do! So Haman did some sort of silly magic type stuff to try to figure out when would be the best time to kill all of the Jews. The Bible says they cast the lot. (I don't know just what they did. But the word for "lot" in that language was "Pur," ["purr"] and we'll see later that this word "pur" is important.)

But now even though Haman was very important, he couldn't just himself go out and have the Jews killed, so he went to King Ahasuerus to get permission to kill them. Haman said to the king, "There are certain people who are all over your kingdom. They have different laws than the rest of us, and they won't keep your laws. You shouldn't put up with that."

And Haman said to the king, "If you like the idea, have it be written down that they may be destroyed, and I'll give a lot of money to those who will take care of it, and you will have money from it."

So the king decided to do that. He took off his ring and gave it to Haman. Now this was a special ring. It was something that could be used like signing the king's name to something. The king or the person that the king gave the ring to would write something, then drop some wax on it and then press the design of the ring into the wax. The design was special to that ring, so that people would know it was from the king. No one else had that design in his ring. So King Ahasuerus was going to let Haman write out the orders himself and sort of sign the king's name to the orders by using the ring.

The king said to Haman, "I'll give you the money and the people to do what you think best."

So the king's scribes wrote down whatever Haman said, and men rode out and took the letters all over the whole Persian empire. The letters said that the people could kill all of the Jews, the young and the old Jews, the little children and the women, they could kill them all in one day. They could kill them on the 13th day of the 12th month. And they could take whatever these Jews had and keep it for themselves. All of this because Haman was so proud!

And when these letters had been sent out, King Ahasuerus and Haman sat down to drink together.

But the people in the city didn't know what to think about this order. Now, Mordecai lived in the city, too, didn't he? And what do you think Mordecai thought when he heard about the order? Why, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and put ashes on himself and went out into the middle of the city and began to cry with a loud and very sad cry. (Remember, tearing your clothes and putting on sackcloth and ashes is a sign of being very, very unhappy, of mourning.) And Mordecai went and sat in front of the king's gate. All over the Persian empire there was great mourning among the Jews, and they fasted and cried and lots of them had on sackcloth and ashes.

Then Queen Esther's maids came and told Esther about Mordecai and what he was doing, and this made her unhappy. Evidently she didn't know about the order to kill all of the Jews. Now Esther couldn't go out to Mordecai herself. But Esther sent clothes out to Mordecai so he would take off his sackcloth, but he wouldn't take the clothes. So Esther then sent one of the men who worked for the king out to Mordecai to ask him what was going on. Mordecai told the king's man about the order to kill the Jews and how Haman was going to give the king lots of money so he could kill the Jews. And Mordecai gave the king's man a copy of Haman's order so he could show it to Esther. He said for Esther to go to the king and beg him so all of the Jews wouldn't get killed. Remember, the Jews were Esther's people, since Esther was a Jew, too. But no one knew that.

So the king's man came and told everything to Esther. But Esther sent a message out to Mordecai. The message said, "No one can go in to see the king unless the king calls him. If a man or a woman comes into the inner part where the king is and the king hasn't called them, the law is that this person is to be killed unless the king holds out his golden sceptre to him." (A sceptre is a fancy kind of staff that kings have.)

Esther said, "And the king hasn't called me to come see him for 30 days." You see, even though Esther was the king's wife and the queen, she still had to wait for him to call her to go see him, or even she might get killed.

This message was taken out to Mordecai. But Mordecai sent a message back to Esther. (Now remember, both Esther and Mordecai were Jews.) And Mordecai said, "Don't think that you will get away more than any other Jew. Even if you don't say anything, there will be some other way for the Jews to be saved. But still you and your family will be destroyed."

And then Mordecai's message said, "Who knows. Maybe this is why you are queen, just for such a time as this."

Then Esther sent a message out to Mordecai. Esther's message said, "Go and gather all of the Jews in the city together. Fast for me. Don't eat or drink for 3 days and 3 nights. My maidens and I will fast, too. And then I will try going in to see the king, even though it's against the law. If I die, all right, I'll just die."

So Mordecai went and did what Esther had told him to do, and they all fasted. (Fasted means they didn't eat.)

Now, on the third day Esther got all dressed up in her queenly robes, and she went and stood near where the king was. The king was sitting on his throne in his royal house. And the king saw Queen Esther standing there. Do you think he had her killed for coming when he hadn't called her? No! Instead, the king who had his golden sceptre in his hand, held his sceptre out to her. That meant that she could come in and talk to him. So Esther came up and touched the top of the sceptre.

The king said to Esther, "What do you want, Queen Esther? What would you like to ask me? I'll give it to you, even if it's half of my kingdom."

Now, I'm sure the king wouldn't really have given her half of his kingdom! But that was a way to show that he would like to give her what she was going to ask for. Well, what do you think Esther asked for?

Esther said, "If it seems like a good idea to you, would you and Haman please come today to a banquet I've fixed for you?" (A banquet means a feast with things to eat or drink.)

Now why would Esther want to invite them to a banquet?! And especially, why Haman?! I thought she wanted to save the lives of all of the Jews, including herself and Mordecai?! Well, we'll find out in a minute! You see, she has a plan!

Well, the king and Haman went that day and drank with Esther. But the king knew that Esther really wanted to ask a favor of him, not just come there and have a good time with her. So King Ahasuerus asked Esther again, "What do you want? I'll give it to you, even if you ask for half of my kingdom."

Esther said, "This is what I want. If you like me, please do what I ask. Please let you and Haman come again tomorrow to a banquet that I will fix for you, and then tomorrow I'll tell you what I really want." You see, Esther was trying to get the king in a very good mood before she told him what she really wanted.

Well, Haman was really happy that the queen herself was asking him to come to her two times with the king! He was so glad! But later when Haman saw Mordecai sitting at the king's gate and that Mordecai didn't stand up or bow for him, Haman was again very angry. Haman didn't say anything then, though. But he went home and he called his wife and friends to him. Haman told all of them how rich he was and how many children he had and how the king had made him so important, even more important than the other important men in the kingdom.

Then Haman said, "Why, Queen Esther asked just the king and me to a banquet she had fixed for us. She didn't ask anyone besides the king except just me, and tomorrow I'm invited again to come with the king."

But then Haman said, "But what good is all of that as long as I see Mordecai the Jew just sitting there at the king's gate?!"

Haman was a proud man, wasn't he? He couldn't be happy with everything he had and all the special honors. He couldn't even be happy because he'd gotten it so that after a while the people would kill all of the Jews, including Mordecai. Being proud is not good, is it?

Well, Haman's wife and all of his friends said to him, "Tell you what. You have a gallows made." (A gallows is where they hang people to kill them.)

They said to Haman, "You make this a big high gallows, 75 feet tall." (That's about as high as 5 regular houses on top of each other!)

They said, "Then tomorrow you ask the king if you can have Mordecai hanged on that gallows. Then you can be all happy as you go to the queen's banquet with the king."

Wasn't that a wicked idea Haman's friends had?! But Haman liked the idea, and he had a big, tall gallows built. (But the king didn't know yet that Haman was mad at Mordecai.)

Well, God works things His own way! And that night King Ahasuerus couldn't sleep. And you know how sometimes when you can't sleep, it helps you get to sleep if someone reads to you? Well, King Ahasuerus decided to be read to. And he ordered someone to bring the book that they wrote down everything that happened in his kingdom. And they began reading this book to him. Well, do you remember what we'd said earlier was written in this book? Yes, about the 2 men who had been planning to kill the king! And who had warned the king about this plan? That's right! Mordecai, Esther's cousin, had warned the king! And they read about this, about Mordecai when he'd warned the king; they read this to Ahasuerus.

Then King Ahasuerus began thinking about it. The king said, "How did we reward Mordecai for this? What honors did we give him?"

And they said to the king, "Nothing was done for Mordecai about this."

Well, that morning Haman was coming into the palace, and he was going to ask the king if he could hang Mordecai on the gallows that he'd had built. Haman wasn't right there where the king could see him, though, as that wouldn't be allowed. (Remember how scared Esther had been to go right in to see the king?) So Haman waited outside to see if someone would tell the king he was there.

The king realized that someone was out there, and he said, "Who is outside waiting to see me?"

They said to the king, "Haman is outside waiting to see you."

King Ahasuerus said, "Have him come in."

So Haman went in. But before the Haman could say anything, King Ahasuerus said to Haman, "Haman, what should be done for a man that I, the king, am very happy about and wants to honor?"

Well, Haman thought to himself, "Oh, who would the king want to honor more than me?!"

So Haman said, "Why, if you want to honor someone, you should bring out one of your royal king's robes and your own horse and your king's crown. And have this king's robe and the horse and crown given to one of your most noble leaders. Then have them put the robe on the man you want to honor and have the man get on your own horse, and have the noble lead the horse all through the city and shout out to everyone, `This is the being done to a man that the king is very happy to honor.'" Again, remember, Haman thought all of this was going to happen to him!

Well, the king liked Haman's idea. And the king said to Haman, "Hurry! Do just what you said! Take my clothes and my horse and do all of that to Mordecai the Jew who is sitting at my gate! Be sure to do everything you just said!"

Well!! What do you think Haman thought about that!?? Here he had just come to ask the king if he could kill Mordecai, if he could hang him!! But there was nothing Haman could do about it! So Haman took the king's clothes and put them on Mordecai himself. And Haman had Mordecai sit on the king's own horse, and Haman himself had to lead the king's horse with Mordecai sitting on it all through the city street and shout out, "This is what the king does to the man he is very happy to honor!"

Well, when Haman got through doing that and had brought Mordecai back to the king's gate, then Haman went back to his own house very, very sad. He even covered his own head to show how very unhappy he was. And Haman told his wife and friends everything that had happened. Then the wise men and his wife said, "Oh, dear. Mordecai is a Jew, and you have begun to fall, not be so important. You won't be able to win against him. You will surely fall before him." They knew this didn't sound good for Haman.

Well, while they were telling Haman this, one of the king's servants came and said to Haman,

"Hurry! It's time to go Queen Esther's banquet with the king."

So King Ahasuerus and Haman went to Esther's rooms to her banquet of wine. And the King knew that Esther had a favor to ask of him, so again the king said to Esther, "What do you want to ask for, Esther. I'll give it to you. What do you want? I'll give it to you even if it's half of my kingdom."

Then Esther said to the king, "If I have found favor with you, O king, please spare my life and spare the lives of my people. We have been sold, my people and I, and are all to be killed. If we had been sold to be slaves, I wouldn't have said anything, but we are all to be killed."

Well, this was a surprise to the king, wasn't it?! Remember, the king and even Haman didn't know that Esther was a Jew! The king said, "Who says he's going to do that?! Where is he?! Who dares to even think such a thing?!"

And Esther said, "The enemy is this wicked Haman."

Then Haman, who was right there with the king and queen, Haman was really scared!!

And the king got up from where he had been drinking, and he was very angry. He went out into the garden. While he was out there, Haman got up, too, and he stood before Esther to beg for his life, because he realized that the king was going to punish him.

Now, people used to sort of lie on couches or mats to eat at that time. They didn't sit on chairs at a table as we do. And Haman had fallen onto the couch where Queen Esther was, to beg her to spare his life. Well, the king came back in, and he was still very angry, and when he saw Haman there by the queen, the king said, "Are you trying to hurt the queen right here in front of me?!" And the king gave an order, and some men came and covered Haman's face. That was a sign that he was to be killed.

Then one of the king's men said to the Ahasuerus, "Look, there is a very high gallows that Haman had built to hang Mordecai on. Mordecai who had saved your life. The gallows is right there by Haman's house."

The king said, "Hang Haman on it!"

So they hanged Haman, killing him, hanging him on the very same gallows that he had been getting ready for Mordecai! Then the king wasn't angry anymore. And King Ahasuerus gave Haman's house and all of the riches in it to Queen Esther. And Esther told the king who Mordecai was, that he was her older cousin and like a father to her, and the king had Mordecai come to him.

Remember that I'd told you earlier that the king had given his ring to Haman, and it was like saying that Haman could write anything he wanted and sign the king's name to it? Well, before Haman was hanged, the ring had been taken away from him, of course. And now the king gave this ring to Mordecai. And Esther had Mordecai take care of all of Haman's house for her.

Now Esther went to the king again. And Esther fell down at his feet and began crying, and she begged him to undo the terrible plan that Haman had made to kill all of the Jews on a certain day.

Ahasuerus held out his golden sceptre to her, so Esther stood up. Esther said, "Please write letters that will change Haman's orders to kill all of the Jews. How could I stand to see all of my people killed?"

Now, the laws of the Medes and Persians could not be changed, not even by the king, so what was the king going to do? Well, Ahasuerus said to Esther and Mordecai, "Look, I've hanged Haman because he was trying to hurt the Jews. Now, you go ahead and write to the Jews. Write whatever you like and say it's from the king. And seal it with the king's seal that's on the king's ring. That way what you write cannot be changed."

So Mordecai told the king's scribes to write some letters and to send them all over the Persian empire to all of the Jews. The letters were written and sealed with the king's ring, and men went out on horses and donkeys and camels to take the letters to Jews all over the big Persian empire. And what do you think Mordecai's letter said?

The letter said, "The king says that the Jews in all of the cities can gather together on the day that they had all been going to be killed. They may get together and defend themselves. Then they may kill anyone who would kill them, and they may take and keep whatever belongs to the people they kill." Wow! So the letters went out, and all of the Jews were very happy now that they could get together and defend themselves when the day came. And the Jews had feasts to celebrate this. And lots of other people became Jews! You see, most people besides the Jews just worshipped idols. But the Jews worshipped the one real God. So it sounds to me as if many people realized that the God of the Jews was the only real God and began worshipping Him.

And then Mordecai was given kingly clothes to wear, blue and white and purple clothes, and he was given a big golden crown. It sounds to me as if now Mordecai were even more important than Haman had been! In fact, the Bible says that the only one more important than Mordecai was the king himself! And the whole city was very happy.

Well, the day that Haman had ordered for the Jews all to be killed finally came. And the Jews were all gathered together to defend themselves. And the Jews won over their enemies and killed many of their enemies. They did this all over the big Persian empire. Now, remember, Mordecai's orders had said that the Jews could take their enemies' things and keep them, but guess what? The Jews only killed people who were trying to kill them -- and they didn't take or keep any of the people's things! They just defended themselves. And Haman had had 10 sons, and all 10 of his sons were hanged on the gallows that Haman had built for Mordecai.

Then the next day after they had killed their enemies, the Jews rested and feasted and had a very happy time and gave each other presents. Now they were free of their enemies! And Mordecai wrote another letter and sent it all over the big Persian empire. This letter said, "From now on, every year at this time the Jews are to celebrate this day when we had rest from our enemies. You are to celebrate that our unhappiness was turned to joy and our sadness was turned into a good day. Every year have a feast those two days and be happy and send gifts to the poor. This will celebrate that Haman's wicked plan was stopped. This time of celebration is to be called Purim ("purr-um"]. It will be called Purim, because Haman cast the lot to decide which day to try to kill all of the Jews." (Remember, I had said earlier that the word for "lot" was "pur"? Well, the name of this celebration, "Purim", comes from that word "pur.")

And the Jews said they would do this every year. And do you know something? Jews all over the world still celebrate Purim to remember about being saved from Haman's wicked plan. They still get together every year and celebrate and read the book of Esther, and they cheer when the reader reads Mordecai's name, and they boo and hiss when the reader reads Haman's name! Doesn't that sound like fun?! I went to one of these Purim celebrations which was done by some Jews who believe in Jesus, and they sang songs and danced and read the book of Esther, and we all hissed at Haman's name and cheered at Mordecai's name! We had a good time! And afterwards we ate some delicious cookies. Some of the cookies were shaped in a funny shape, and they were called Haman's hat. It was fun! And everyone was very happy as they remembered this story of Queen Esther.

And that is the end of the story about wicked Haman, King Ahasuerus, beautiful Queen Esther, and wise Mordecai.

Now, where in the Bible do you think we could find this story if you wanted to read it? That's easy, isn't it! It is all in the book of Esther! And that's in the Old Testament, isn't it? The story of Esther happened a long time before Jesus came to earth. Of course, we read about Jesus here on earth in the New Testament, don't we.

But do you want to know something strange about the book of Esther? Nowhere in the book does it actually mention God's name! Not once does it say "God" or "the Lord!" But when Esther and all the Jews in the city fasted for 3 days and nights, they would have been praying to the Lord God, too, wouldn't they? And we can see in this story how God worked out His plan, can't we? How God had Esther to be queen right at that time, and how God had it so that King Ahasuerus wouldn't be mad at Esther when she came to him but instead was kind to her and said he'd do whatever she wanted. And how God saved the Jews from being killed. And how God used Haman's evil plan of the very high gallows to actually hang Haman himself on it. By the way, there is an expression that people sometimes use that comes from this true story. If someone thinks that someone else is especially wicked, he might say, "That person should be hanged higher than Haman!"

The story of Esther makes me think of how much the Lord God loves His people. And the Bible tells us that God loves the world so much that He sent His Son Jesus to the world to die for people's sin. And if anyone believes this and trusts Jesus to save them from their sins, He will. Then someday we can be with the Lord Jesus forever.

Did you like this true story about the beautiful, brave Queen Esther? I hope so.