

Esther

My name is Esther, in Hebrew, Hadassah. It is the name of the flowering myrtle of my country.

My story sounds like a simple fairy tale, poor girl becomes queen of the world's most powerful empire, but it is a little more complicated than that.

There is racial prejudice, political intrigue and bizarre legal complications, not to mention multiple life-threatening situations. The name of The LORD is not mentioned in my book but can anyone fail to notice how He controlled the circumstances to bring about the salvation of His people and the destruction of those who hate Him?

My predecessor as queen was a beautiful and sophisticated woman named Vashti. She fell out of favor when she refused to come before the king when he wanted to show her off in front of his drunken friends. Xerxes could have just let it pass but that is not the way of kings and his advisors saw this as a threat to the rule of every man in his own house. (How fragile is the male ego?!)

Just like that a search was made for a new queen and every young woman was "invited" – make that commanded – to appear. My mother, God rest her soul, always said that my face was naturally beautiful and needed no artificial enhancement. But the protocol for appearing before the king involved a 1 year beauty treatment.

I was not interested in being queen or impressing the king or being slathered with oils and perfumes for months, but my cousin and guardian, Mordecai, who had cared for me as his own since my parents died, said I must do it, but must not tell that I am Jewish.

I felt that my chances were about zero and was looking forward to returning to be myself again when the incredible happened, I was chosen. But you can forget the "happily ever after" part! I found out little by little that I had been placed in a position of great opportunity but also great danger, requiring trust in the LORD, even as He spoke through Mordecai.

The LORD allowed Mordecai to discover a plot against the king and report to me with orders to report to the king. Thus when the truth was confirmed and the criminals executed, the credit went to me and my cousin. The LORD also gave Mordecai the opportunity to irritate one of the king's favorite supporters, Haman, by failing to bow to him. Of course, a Jew will only bow to God! This became a key event in the whole story.

Anyway, Haman, consummate politician that he was, found out that Mordecai was a Jew and convinced the king that all Jews were a threat. Despite the fact that kings Cyrus and Darius before him had given Jews permission to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple, a date was set for the extermination of the Jews.

When Mordecai found out about this he was in great distress over the terrible massacre that was about to occur. He put on torn clothing covered in dust as a sign of his mourning and dressed like that could not even enter the palace. I had to communicate by messenger and when he told me to appeal to the king, I reminded him that anyone who enters the king's presence uninvited, will be executed – unless the king extends his scepter.

He reminded me that I was a Jew and sooner or later Haman would find out and would include me in the extermination. But he also said something that grabbed me even more than my own survival, "Who knows but that you have come to the royal position for such a time as this." I asked Mordecai to gather all the Jews in the city to fast and pray and I also fasted and prayed.

I had heard the stories of the heroes of old saving the nation, Moses, Samuel, Gideon and David, but also women such as Deborah. Perhaps the LORD would allow me such a privilege.

I determined to do it but was not sure what would happen to me. The king might easily say, "Haman is a trusted supporter and I can get a new queen any time I want!" I did not know the outcome any more than the three who were thrown into the fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar, although, like them, I knew the LORD was able.

For some reason – I later realized it to be the leading of the Lord -- I could not come to the point at the first opportunity. When Haman and the king attended the banquet my chefs and servants had prepared, I said that my request was just that they come for another banquet the next day. The most amazing things happened that night.

The king could not sleep and asked for the most sleep-inducing thing possible to be read to him, the court records, usually filled with the most excruciatingly boring details. But the servant "just happened to read" the account of Mordecai's discovery of a plot against the king's life. The king asked how Mordecai had been rewarded and it "just happened" that he had not and when the king asked for an advisor "it just happened" that Haman was in the court at that early hour about to ask permission to hang Mordecai on a newly built 75 foot gallows. But he was ordered to the throne room to answer a question instead.

Without naming names, the king "just happened to ask" Haman how a man the king wanted to honor should be treated. Haman, thinking it must be himself, said that that man should be dressed in royal clothes, placed on a royal horse and led around the city by a high noble shouting, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor." Does the LORD have a sense of humor? When Haman carried out the king's order – doing all this for Mordecai -- he must have begun to feel like his world was collapsing.

Then the next banquet occurred and again the king was in a very expansive mood saying that he would grant my request up to half his kingdom. When I said that my request was simply to save my life and the lives of my people who had all been scheduled for destruction, the king demanded to know who was behind this. I said that it was Haman and the king stormed out into the garden to cool off. Haman, attempting to appeal to me to spare his life, had fallen onto my couch. The king returned in a rage seeing what appeared to be Haman making a pass at me and ordered his immediate execution.

That ought to be the grizzly end of the story but lawyers got involved. It turns out that the laws of the Medes and the Persians cannot be revoked, so the king's hands were tied – you wish he had been a little more careful about making laws in the first place – but he allowed Mordecai and me the freedom to make any law we wished to counteract the law of extermination and sign it with his ring.

The law that was passed and sent out in the languages of all 127 provinces of the empire was that the Jews could defend themselves. And when they did, most of the officials of the empire sided with the Jews and it was a great victory, which reminded all the nations of the earth that the LORD God of Israel is the true God.

A Festival called Purim was begun. It is a two day festival, perhaps in memory of the fact that it took two days to come to the point of telling the king my request. But it was the LORD's plan to orchestrate, as only He could do, all the events that played into this amazing story.

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By Ross S. Olson

In honor of my granddaughter, Esther Roanna Olson

With the prayer that she will be as brave as her namesake.