



## Persistent Women: Esther

### Esther 7:1-7

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Sadly, throughout the history of the Church, women have been marginalized in their leadership roles in the church. Still today, some of the largest Christian bodies worldwide continue to uphold their historical positions, and refuse to allow women to become clergy. By pulling from a few select texts within Paul's letters, these denominational bodies maintain that women weren't created to hold such sacred leadership roles within the faith community. Yet, to make this claim, one has to ignore, or choose to disagree with, the Biblical stories that present women as faithful followers who were gifted by God the strength, wisdom, and leadership to hold such sacred roles. Speaking against such an unfaithful reading of the Bible, this month we are learning about some of the women who modeled faithful leadership in the Biblical text.

We are calling these women *Persistent Women of the Bible*. As we read about their stories, we find that *persistence* is not a negative connotation. Persistence is defined as "standing firm in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition." Though designated by their surroundings as being of marginal significance – these are women in a society where only men were thought to have any substantial worth – the persistence of these women should *only* be seen as their faithful willingness to go against the powers of society to speak on behalf of God, and to stand up for the eternal will of God.

Today, we learn from a woman who, by the designation of the Book's title, is already given a bit more respect than many of the women we encounter in the Biblical text ... she does have a book named after her, and in the Jewish tradition, she even has a festival named after her. Today we learn about the persistent faithfulness of Esther.

As with the other women we have studied, knowing her story is important for knowing her significance. The book of Esther is just 10 chapters long, so it's an easy read if you want to know her full story. And perhaps more so than many of the Biblical books, Esther is a fun read. It's as engaging as a Shakespearean drama – utilizing humor and extravagance to tell a story about over zealous characters who try to trick others into getting their way, and a triumphant victory for a community whose entire future was in jeopardy.

The story takes place in Persia – the Jewish people, including Esther, are living in exile under the rule of a foreign king. The current king in the story is King Ahasuerus (uh-ha-zur-us). The story begins with the king calling for his wife, Queen Vashti, to be brought into his presence so he can show off her beauty. The Queen refuses to appear before the King, and the king is enraged. He called upon his leaders of the law asking how he should respond to her disrespect. The sages consult and come back appealing to the King to be strict in his response. They claimed that if he did not make an example of the queen, all the women of the land would see her as a role

model, and all the women would have contempt for their husbands, just as the Queen had for the King. These leaders, all men, were fearful that if word got out that the Queen had refused the King, that all the women across the land would rebel and would refuse their husbands.

To ensure no such situation came to be, the King was encouraged by his legal team, and he sent out an edict that in every house across the kingdom, the man should be master of his house. The ruling declared that women would give honor to their husbands. ... Yes, you heard right. In response to his own wife refusing him, the King issued a declaration that women must obey their husbands in every house across the kingdom. Talk about the government telling women what they can and can't do – with such a ruling, it would have been illegal for women to say no to their husbands.

The King was clearly none too pleased with Queen Vashti, so he sought to have her replaced as the queen. The King invited his servants to bring all the beautiful young virgins from throughout the kingdom to the harem, and then receive cosmetic treatments before being presented that he might choose a new queen. Here enters Esther.

Esther is Jewish, part of the people of Israel, but she's living in exile in Persia. Both Esther's mother and father had died, and she had been living with her cousin, Mordecai, who had adopted her. After the invitation had gone out by the king, Mordecai brought Esther up to the harem and gave her into the custody of the palace. This young female, described as beautiful and fair, was given by her adopted parent – her own cousin, no less – as a concubine into the king's harem. The women who were brought into the harem were treated for twelve months with cosmetic treatments before they could even be presented to the king. In Chapter 2, we're told that after twelve months of preparation, each woman would go one evening into the king, and the next day they would come back to the harem. A girl could not go back in to the king, "unless the king delighted in her and summoned her by name." When Esther was sent in, the king loved her more than all the other women, and he placed the crown on her head, and she became the new queen, replacing Vashti.

This is the world in which Esther is living. It's a time when women were controlled by the ruling leaders who issued edicts declaring they could not disobey their husbands – declaring they did not have control over their own bodies. It's a time when young women were stripped from their homes, forced through cosmetic treatments, and ordered to spend the night with the king at his sole bequest. It's a time when young women were chosen as wives – even as the Queen – based on their appearance and on how well they pleased the King. This is not a time when women were empowered; it's not a time when women had voice or say in what happened to them; it's a time when women were seen as little more than property.

Moving forward in the story understanding this context, Esther is now Queen. King Ahasuerus has named as his lead official a man named Haman. Mordecai – Esther's cousin (the one who gave her over to the palace) – had sat at the gates of the palace every day since he had turned Esther over to the harem. Haman and Mordecai have this subplot in the text. Haman grew angry with Mordecai because Mordecai would not bow before him when he walked past the

gate. Haman felt disrespected. Haman's anger grew into bitterness, and eventually Haman was ready to destroy Mordecai. During this time, Haman learned that Mordecai was Jewish. So, as Haman plotted how to take out his anger against Mordecai, he came up with a plan that would destroy all of the Jews. Haman went to the king, and offered the king 10,000 talents of silver for the Jews.

It's important to highlight two details of this plan. First, our translation in Chapter 3 says Haman paid the king for the "*destruction* of the Jews," but in the Hebrew language, in which this text was first written, it better translates to say that Haman was asking the Jews to be sold into his ownership, such that they would be his slaves.<sup>i</sup> As his slaves, he could destroy those he wanted destroyed, and force the rest into labor. The second thing to note is the value – 10,000 talents. That number may seem tame at first. 10,000 talents of silver for an entire ethnic group of refugees? That's what they were – exiles – refugees – living in Persia. It seems like this is a low number to buy the ownership of an entire ethnic group. It would be hard to do an exact calculation, but 10,000 talents of silver would be like offering somewhere between \$160 million up to a couple billion dollars, depending on the value of silver. The point being, this is an absurdly high amount of money that Haman is offering just so he can kill Mordecai.

Mordecai learns of Haman's deal with the king, tears his clothing, and sits in mourning at the palace gates. Esther is troubled by Mordecai's actions. (No doubt, she can see him from her palace window.) She sends clothing to him, but he refuses them. She then sends one of the king's eunuchs to ask Mordecai what he was doing, and Mordecai informs the eunuch of Haman's plan, and the sum of money he has paid the king for the control of the Jews. The eunuch takes the information back to Esther, who is rightfully troubled. As a Jew herself, she's ready to go to the king and beg for her people's safety, but she knows that she cannot enter the king's court without an invitation. So, she sends the eunuch back to Mordecai.

Now, one should only read this part of the story as a Monty Python-esque scene, where the eunuch is running up and down the palace stairs from the top of the palace tower to deliver messages from Esther to Mordecai, and back again – because isn't that where ever damsel in distress is housed? As the eunuch gets to Mordecai, Mordecai's like, "you have to take my message back to her." The eunuch rolls his eyes, and quickly returns to the queen's room in the top of the tower. The queen hears the reply, and says, "go back and tell him something else." The eunuch, disheartened, descends again to the palace gates. Mordecai again says, "take his message back." The eunuch must be drenched in sweat, leaning over as he once again scales the palace stairs. Almost dreading her response, the eunuch delivers his message from Mordecai, which says, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Interesting, isn't it? Mordecai gave his cousin into the king's concubines. He then stood at the gates of the palace to keep an eye on her, but it is his disobedience to royal law that has brought into jeopardy the well-being of the entire Jewish community. And yet, he is now saying

to Esther, “perhaps it’s such a time as this that you’re the queen.” ... Really Mordecai? Perhaps had you just been obedient to the royal rules and kept your mouth shut, we wouldn’t be in this mess. I feel like there’s a joke here about women cleaning up the mess men make ... but I’ll leave that one alone. ... What we find is that Esther’s a better leader than I. She has one more message for Mordecai.

Esther sends the eunuch back down to Mordecai, and says, “Gather all the Jews in the area, and hold a fast on my behalf – do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will do the same. After that, I will go before the king, even though the law mandates I cannot. If I perish, I perish.” She’s willing to do the whole civil disobedience thing, but not without God’s help.

With the safety of her people at risk, with her cousin, who gave her to be the king’s nightly maiden, causing problems, Esther is being called on to speak up, to take a stand, and to protect her entire ethnic lineage. She’s already in an impossible place, with a king who doesn’t really appreciate women in general – but especially dislikes women who disobey what they’re told (don’t forget Vasthi or the king’s response to her refusal). And yet, Esther says, you go and fast – engage in the spiritual disciplines of our faith which call upon the support of our God – and afterward, I *will* go before the king, even if it means my death.

After the three days, Esther does go before the king, as risky a move as it may be, and the king invites her to make a request. Instead of speaking up and defending the Jews at that moment, she has planned a wiser path. She invites the king to allow her to plan a dinner for both the king and Haman – she wants them both to be present. The king accepts.

It is this banquet feast that Esther has put together for the king and Haman where we encounter our reading today in Chapter 7. It’s quite a feast! Verse one says they went in to dine with her. Verse 2 says, “On the second day ...” This is not your normal dinner party – this is a multiple day affair. On the second day, the king again asks Esther, “What is your petition? What is your request?” She responds in like manner, “Let my life be given me – that is my petition. And the lives of my people – that is my request.”

She continues, articulating clearly to the king the problem. “We have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.”

Esther, in her request before the king, makes three things clear. First, she will stand up for those in her community. The risk to her community is just as much a risk for herself. She will not ask to be spared alone, but she will stand up for what is right for all her people. Second, she calls out the injustice in Haman’s plan. Haman’s plan was not just for the people to be sold into slavery – had it been so simple, Esther might have stayed quiet – but his plan was ultimately for their destruction. She will not stand for such injustice. And finally, she connects the destruction of the Jews with the downfall of the king. “No enemy,” she says, “can compensate for this

damage to the king.” No sum of money, not even such a gross overpayment like some hundreds of millions of dollars, is sufficient to keep the king innocent from the destruction of these people. The king himself will be held accountable if this plan goes through. It may be Haman’s plan, but it will do damage to the king.

From a child of exile with no living parents, to a member of the king’s harem at the hand of her own cousin, to a queen who could not see her king without fear of banishment, to a well-placed insider who must clean up her cousin’s mess, to an example of faithfulness wherein one risks it all for the justice of others, Esther uses the small opportunity she had been granted to speak wise words that would change the course of the history of God’s people. She did not try to go it alone, but she called on her community, the very community whose safety was in danger, that they might call upon God to give her strength and knowledge. Esther’s persistence was about more than defending her own safety, she was standing up for an entire people – a people under rule in a foreign land – a people who had little if any say in their country of residence – a people who were exiled refugees due to their own homeland being overthrown – a people who were to become enslaved and / or destroyed. At the risk of her own life, and at the risk of losing the little privilege she had as Queen, she risked it all to take down a man who was at the top of the king’s court who had tried to secretly kill her people.

One cannot read such a story and claim that women do not give us good examples of faithful tenacity in speaking up to the powerful about the truth of God’s claim for justice, and who persist in their pleading for the life of even the most poor and unwelcome exiles living in the land. Esther is a model – especially for those who live in the shadow of the Capital – of using one’s position in high political arenas to speak and act on behalf of the God of justice.

May we claim Esther’s story, and may it give us the courage as people of faith, even those serving in political positions, to call upon God for the strength we need to have the courage to speak out against such political evils, that we too may join God’s call for justice even when it means risking our own peril. Thanks be to God for the witness of such persistent women of the faith that they may empower us to speak on God’s behalf in this era, as they have in eras past. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Carol M. Bechtel. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Esther*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002.