

# “Refusing Corruption”

Esther Select Verses & Isaiah 61:1

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September 26, 2021

**Prayer for Understanding** Holy Spirit thank you for giving us life. Guide us in truth, enlighten us and set our hearts ablaze so every moment of our lives can be illumined with your amazing grace, steadfast love and abundant life. Amen.

You are gifted to refuse corruption and create joyful, loving community. The book of Esther tells of three courageous people Vashti, Mordecai, and Esther who boldly said no to fear, no to hate, refused corruption and with patience, tact, and cunning saved people from murder. Each of them risked their life and endured hardship to stand up for love and equal treatment of all people.

Mordecai says to Esther, **Esther 4:14 NLT “If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?”** All of us have the ability to refuse corruption and create joyful, loving community. All of us have the gift of love. You have unique talents for just such a time as this. As we explore the book of Esther together, I pray all of us will be filled with courage to love extravagantly, to refuse hate, refuse fear, refuse corruption, and usher in peace, joy, and love.

The fact that the book of Esther is even in the Bible demonstrates love triumphant over sexism. It is a supernatural, Holy Spirit guided, miracle that power hungry men, during a time when women had no voice, put the book of Esther in the Bible. There is no mention of God anywhere in this book. God is incarnate, personified by women. Vashti’s and Esther’s bold love saved lives.

What corruption is God calling you to refuse? How is God asking you to say no to fear and no to hate? In addition to love what other gifts has God given you designed for this time, this place, to transform our world to a more peaceful, loving, joyful place, a community where all belong and are cherished?

Vashti was an orphan from a family of corrupt leaders, by her tenacity she became queen. We can surmise Vashti’s frustration as the king and elite enjoyed grand banquets, wild parties, and excessive wasteful decadence, as the poor struggled to find food. The corrupt rich lounged around while the women were doing the work. The elite failed to appreciate their wives as people only interested in sex. During one of these exquisite, prolonged parties a drunk King Xerxes demands **Esther 1:11-12 “bring Queen Vashti to me with the royal crown on her head. Xerxes wanted the nobles and all the other men to gaze on her beauty, for she was a very beautiful woman. But when they conveyed the king’s order to Queen Vashti, she refused to come. This made the king furious, and he burned with anger.”** The corrupt elite started a fear campaign. **Esther 1:17 “Women everywhere will begin to despise their husbands when they learn that Queen Vashti has refused to appear before the king.”** Vashti was banished.

The Jews were exiles and suffered from discrimination. Esther’s parents died. Esther was adopted by her Jewish cousin Mordecai. Esther kept her Jewish heritage a secret. Esther became queen. Mordecai and Esther stopped an assassination attempt on the king. Mordecai refused to bow and support corrupt Haman. **Esther 3:5-6 “When Haman saw that Mordecai would not bow down or show him respect, he was filled with rage. He had learned of Mordecai’s nationality, so he decided it was not enough to lay hands on Mordecai alone. Instead, he looked for a way to destroy all the Jews throughout the entire empire of Xerxes.”** **Esther 3:8-10 & 13 “Then Haman approached King Xerxes and said, “There is a certain race of people scattered through all the provinces of your empire who keep themselves separate from everyone else. Their laws are different from those of any other people, and they refuse to obey the laws of the king. So it is not in the king’s interest to let them live. If it please the king, issue a decree that they be destroyed, and I will give 10,000 large sacks of silver to the government administrators to be deposited in the royal treasury.”** The king agreed. Dispatches were sent by swift messengers into all the provinces of the empire, giving the order that all Jews—young and old, including women and children—must be killed, slaughtered, and annihilated on a single day. The property of the Jews would be given to those who killed them.”

Mordecai sent a message explaining the situation to Esther and asked **Esther 4:8, “her to go to the king to beg for mercy and plead for her people.** Esther sent back a message. **Esther 4:10 “All the king’s officials and even the people in the provinces know that anyone who appears before the king in his inner court without**

being invited is doomed to die unless the king holds out his gold scepter.” Mordecai replied. Esther 4:13-14 “Don’t think for a moment that because you are in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?” Esther replied. Esther 4:16 & 5:2-3 “I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I must die. When Xerxes saw Esther standing there in the inner court, he welcomed her and held out the gold scepter to her. The king asked her, “What do you want, Queen Esther? What is your request? I will give it to you, even if it is half the kingdom!”

Esther asked for Haman to come to a banquet that Esther will arrange for the king. Esther 5:10-14 “Then Haman gathered together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, and boasted to them about his great wealth and his many children. Haman bragged about the honors the king had given him and how he had been promoted over all the other nobles and officials. Then Haman added, “And that’s not all! Queen Esther invited only me and the king himself to the banquet she prepared for us. And she has invited me to dine with her and the king again tomorrow!” Then Haman added, “But this is all worth nothing as long as I see Mordecai the Jew just sitting there at the palace gate.” So, Haman’s wife, Zeresh, and all his friends suggested, “Set up a sharpened pole that stands seventy-five feet tall, and in the morning ask the king to impale Mordecai on it. When this is done, you can go on your merry way to the banquet with the king.” This pleased Haman, and he ordered the pole set up.

That night the king had trouble sleeping so he read the history of his reign including the account of how Mordecai and Esther stopped an assassination attempt on his life. In the morning the king asked. Esther 6:3 “What reward or recognition did we ever give Mordecai. His attendants replied, “Nothing has been done for him.” Xerxes’ honors Mordecai. Next, Esther 7:1-6 “the king and Haman went to Queen Esther’s banquet. On this second occasion, while they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, “Tell me what you want, Queen Esther. What is your request? I will give it to you, even if it is half the kingdom!” Queen Esther replied, “If I have found favor with the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my request, I ask that my life and the lives of my people will be spared. For my people and I have been sold to those who would kill, slaughter, and annihilate us. If we had merely been sold as slaves, I could remain quiet, for that would be too trivial a matter to warrant disturbing the king.” “Who would do such a thing?” King Xerxes demanded. “Who would be so presumptuous as to touch you?” Esther replied, “This wicked Haman is our adversary and our enemy.” An official said, Esther 7:9 “Haman has set up a sharpened pole that stands seventy-five feet tall in his own courtyard. Haman intended to use it to impale Mordecai, the man who saved the king from assassination.” “Then impale Haman on it!” the king ordered.”

The King realizes Esther is a Jew. Esther 8:3-5 “Then Esther went again before the king, falling down at his feet and begging him with tears to stop the evil plot devised by Haman against the Jews. Again, the king held out the gold scepter to Esther. So, she rose and stood before him. Esther said, “If it please the king, and if I have found favor with him, and if he thinks it is right, and if I am pleasing to him, let there be a decree that reverses the orders of Haman who ordered that Jews throughout all the king’s provinces should be destroyed.” A new decree was issued to protect the Jews. Esther 8:16 “The Jews were filled with joy and gladness and were honored everywhere.” Esther 10:3 “Mordecai the Jew became the prime minister, with authority next to that of King Xerxes himself. Mordecai was very great among the Jews, who held him in high esteem, because he continued to work for the good of his people and to speak up for the welfare of all their descendants.”

The Jews were saved by Queen Vashti saying no to the king and Esther’s courageous cunning with the king. You are gifted to refuse corruption and create joyful, loving community.

Homiletics explains that the purpose of Esther is to remind us that one can prosper in a foreign land as an exile without giving up on one’s identity. In other words if Esther can do it, so can you. There were numerous forces positioned against Esther. God seemed to be doing nothing. Esther spoke against corruption and saved lives. You can stop corruption and save lives. God is eager to end hate, disperse fear, and usher in love through you. All of us are called to love extravagantly even in moments when the situation is completely unfavorable, even hostile to our life. The prophet Isaiah declares, Isaiah 61:1 “The spirit of the Lord God is upon us, because the Lord has anointed us; God is sending us to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.”

Sojourner Truth was born into slavery. She escaped with her daughter in 1826. After going to court to recover her son in 1828, she became the first black woman to win such a case against a white man. At a Women’s Rights Convention in New York City in 1853, Sojourner Truth was one of the speakers. Although she was illiterate, she knew her Bible stories. She said, “Queen Esther come forth, for she was oppressed, and felt there was a great wrong

and she said I will die, or I will bring my complaint before the king. Should the king of the United States be greater, or more crueler, or more harder?"

Rabbi Fred Hyman said, "Esther represents a time when God is not found, is "hidden," when the Divine Presence seems to be obscured. Yet, in the end, the people are saved. It is interesting to note that the name of God does not appear even once in the entire scroll of Esther. This absence leads scholars to question its inclusion in the biblical canon. However, Jewish tradition says that although God is not directly present, God's guiding hand is evident in how all the random details of the narrative come together at the conclusion of the story. It has been a year of the coronavirus and restrictions are still in place. We need to remain vigilant, despite our "fatigue," to keep each other safe. Because we may not see God, we still must have faith that the Lord is watching us, is with those who suffered losses, and is giving strength to caregivers to assist the ill."

Henri Nouwen wrote, "We are fearful people. We are afraid of conflict, war, an uncertain future, illness, and, most of all, death. This fear takes away our freedom and gives our society the power to manipulate us with threats and promises. When we can reach beyond our fears to God who loves us with a love that was there before we were born, and will be there after we die, then oppression, persecution, and even death will be unable to take away our freedom."

Anna Carter Florence said, "I would be willing to bet good money that most of you listening have never heard of Vashti. If that is the case, do not feel that you have flunked the latest biblical literacy test. No one knows about Vashti. And the reason, I think, is that her story is what I would call a dangerous memory. "Dangerous memories" are exactly what they sound like: things that really happened, but that are too damaging, or too racy, or just too embarrassing to remember. We have to remember that Esther, who is only crowned because she hides the dangerous memory of her Jewish heritage, chooses to risk her life when she discovers a plot to slaughter all Jews in the realm. She realizes that God may have sent her to the kingdom "for such a time as this," and she decides to speak up on behalf of her people. When we read the book of Esther at all, we usually read that part of the story. But I wonder whether Esther would have ever found the courage to do as she did if she did not have the example of Vashti, her predecessor, the woman who just said no. In an age when women did not have a purpose, any purpose, other than that of being decorative and fertile, Vashti cut new ground. No, she said, I am more than a cheap thrill. I am more than a decorative display. I am a human being, with integrity and self-respect, and here, I draw the line: I say no. Esther finishes what Vashti started. Together, their story is a sacred memory of how women, or any oppressed people, can overturn a world by just saying no. It is a story of how we are so connected that one injustice can lead to another; one resistance can give rise to another. Isn't it odd, then, that in the eyes of the church, this sacred memory has become a dangerous memory? Why have we not heard this story? What is so dangerous about it? Maybe the church has thought that Vashti challenges the order of the day in a dangerous way. She does, after all, say NO to the king. What if everyone said no to the king? What if every woman said no to a man? Maybe the church has not wanted us to consider a world in which subjects just say no to their leaders and women just say no to men."

Samuel Wells said. "Don't miss the fact that we have a mini-gospel here. Esther is a kind of Jesus, at the right hand of God, laying down her life for the salvation of the Jews. Esther saves her people. She does so because she is stirred to an act of extraordinary fortitude. The story teaches us a number of general lessons. It teaches us that life under arbitrary authority is dangerous for everybody, especially women and minority ethnic groups. It teaches us that power is not simply an all or nothing thing — Esther is queen and yet still vulnerable, she is a Jew and yet she can marry the most powerful man in the world, she can be unaware that she is shortly to be executed yet she can wrap the king around her little finger. The heart of the story lies in these echoing words, words which I hope makes your stomach tighten and your breath falter just as much as if Mordecai were saying them to you today. "Perhaps you have come to this place, to this moment, to these people, to this challenge, for just such a time as this."

You are gifted to refuse corruption and create joyful, loving community. Amen