

Esther

Valleys Family Church Sermon (Family meeting) Stuart Wheatman, Sunday 26th Aug 2012

(Adapted from *Everyone Matters*, pgs 74-79, by Tricia Williams, Scripture Union 1996)

Bible base: The book of Esther. 2:10,20 — Secret 1 (Esther's); 2:21-23 — Secret 2 (Mordecai's); 3:5-6 — Secret 3 (Haman's); 4:15 — 5:8 — Secret 4 (Esther's); 5:9-14 — Secret 5 (Haman's); 6:1-11 — Secret 6 (the king's); 7 — Secret 7 (Esther's).

Prep

- Beforehand find out some 'secrets' about some of the congregation (pets, hobbies, parents' jobs, foot ball team supported etc). The people concerned should be surprised that you know their secret, but do not use anything which is likely to cause real embarrassment.
- Labels to hang on volunteers: Esther, Mordecai, Haman, the king
- In envelopes:
Secret 1 (Esther's) — I am Jewish.
Secret 2 (Mordecai's) — I discovered a secret plot to assassinate the king.
Secret 3 (Haman's) — I made a secret plan to kill Mordecai — and all the Jews.
Secret 4 (Esther's) — I made a dangerous and secret plan to save my people from extermination.
Secret 5 (Haman's) — I built some gallows — secretly —ready for Mordecai.
Secret 6 (the king's) — I made a secret plan to reward Mordecai.
Secret 7 (Esther's) — I have a secret plan: I am going to tell the king about Haman's secret plot.

Intro-

- Today we are going to hear a true story from the Bible which had 7 secrets in it.
- *Share some of the 'secrets' about congregation.*
- There was once a beautiful and brave woman called Esther. With great courage and daring she saved her people, the Jews, from extermination. It's a Bible story found in the Old Testament and happened at the time when the Jewish people had been captured and were living in exile in the Persian Empire.
- 4 volunteers for the 4 characters.
Esther — the heroine of the story;
Mordecai — Esther's good and wise cousin, who had brought her up and held a high position in the king's government;
Haman — the wicked Persian prime minister;
The king — the emperor of Persia, crazy about Esther, whom he made his queen.
- This is a story full of secrets and that all will be revealed as they listen. *Move from secret to secret. Use the outline below, asking the four volunteers to read out their 'secrets' to the rest of the children as you go along (eg 'Esther' reads 'Secret 1', 'Mordecai' reads 'Secret 2' etc).*

SECRET 1 (Esther's) — I am Jewish.

- The Persian king's name was Xerxes the 1st (also known as Ahaseurus). He was having a huge party and showing off his power and wealth to many in his kingdom. When he had drunk too much he wanted to show everyone how beautiful his wife was. However his queen, Vashti, refused to come and this the king very angry. So he made the decision to never see her again. After taking advice he later decided to have a beauty contest to look for a new queen. Lots of beautiful girls were taken to meet the king. First they had to have beauty treatment for a whole year. A certain girl called Esther entered the competition (Esther was named after the Babylonian & Assyrian goddess of love and war, Ishtar- there was a gate in ancient Babylon called the Ishtar or Esther gate- now in a museum in Berlin!). The king and he chose Esther because she was so beautiful. However, there was something he didn't know about Esther.

- Give 'Esther' the envelope marked, 'Secret 1'. Ask your volunteer to open it and read it out to the other children.
- Esther's Jewish name was Hadassah (meaning 'Myrtle Tree'). The Jews (or Israelites) were exiles — a captive nation — living in the Persian Empire. They had been taken away by the Babylonians for 70 years, but then the Persians conquered the Babylonians and many Jews could go back to Israel. However, for various reasons many stayed in places like Babylon and Persia. So Esther was one of the lowliest in Persian society. But the king didn't know she was Jewish. Her position as queen put her in the best position for standing up for the rights of her people.

SECRET 2 (Mordecai's) — *I discovered a secret plot to assassinate the king.*

- Esther had a cousin, Mordecai. He had brought Esther up because she was an orphan. We don't know his Jewish name, but Mordecai was named after the patron god of the ancient city of Babylon, Marduk (similar to Daniel's name being changed to Belteshazzar). He was a kind and highly respected man who had been given an important job in the king's government. Because of his important position, he learnt a secret.
- Give Mordecai the envelope marked, 'Secret 2'. Ask your volunteer to open it and read out the 'secret'.
- Mordecai told Esther the secret and she told the king. As a result, the king's life was saved. The king was very grateful to Mordecai, and this fact is very important later on in the story.

SECRET 3 (Haman's) — *I made a secret plan to kill Mordecai — and all the Jews.*

- For some reason, the king made a nasty man named Haman prime minister. Haman was an Amalekite and a descendant of King Agag. The Amalekites really hated the Jews, they had attacked Israel and tried to destroy them when they had come out of being slaves in Egypt for 400 years. As a result of this, God told the Israelites to destroy them, but the Israelites didn't always obey God. King Saul particularly disobeyed God in this respect and left the King of the Amalekites, called Agag, alive. Afterwards, however, the Amalekite King was killed by Samuel the prophet. Haman was a direct descendant of this Agag, so he really hated the Jews.
- Haman was very pleased with himself that he was prime minister and expected everyone below him in rank to bow down to him. Everyone did — except Mordecai. He said that he wouldn't because he was a Jew. Jews worshipped God, not men. This made Haman very angry. He decided on a secret plan.
- Give 'Secret 3' to 'Haman'. Ask your volunteer to open the envelope and read out the 'secret'.
- Haman decided that he would get rid of all these troublesome Jews. He persuaded the King to issue a decree that all Jews in the Kingdom of Persia (stretching from India to Egypt) should be killed on a certain day. He didn't realise that the queen herself was a Jew. He cast lots (the Hebrew word for 'lots' is 'Purim') to find out when he should do this and the date fell on the 13th day of the month of Adar (this is around our February & March time of year).

SECRET 4 (Esther's) — *I made a dangerous and secret plan to save my people from extermination.*

- Mordecai asked Esther to do something to help save her people from extermination by the evil Haman. The book of Esther tells us exactly what he said to her: "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)
- Give 'Esther' the envelope marked, 'Secret 4' to open. Ask your volunteer to read out the 'secret'.

- Even though Esther was queen, she wasn't allowed to see the king unless he sent for her. If she did go to him without being invited, the king might order her to be put to death, however, if he extended the royal sceptre she would be allowed to live.
- So Esther did a very brave thing: she dressed herself in her best clothes and then went to see him, knowing he might order her execution. But he didn't, instead he extended the royal sceptre.
- Esther didn't tell the king what she wanted straight away. Instead, she invited the king and Haman to a special party, knowing all the time what Haman was plotting and what she was going to do. After the first party, Esther invited them to another party. The king of course was very pleased with Esther, and intrigued as to why she was going to all this trouble.

SECRET 5 (*Haman's*) — *I built some gallows — secretly — ready for Mordecai.*

- Meanwhile Haman was still feeling very angry with Mordecai. Haman's wife suggested to Haman that he'd feel much more relaxed about the special party, with the king and queen, if he got rid of Mordecai.
- *Give 'Haman' the envelope marked, 'Secret 5' to open. Ask your volunteer to read out the 'secret'.*
- The gallows were huge- 25 feet tall! But the king didn't know about Haman's plan to hang Mordecai.

SECRET 6 (*the king's*) — *I made a secret plan to reward Mordecai.*

- That night the King had trouble sleeping. To help him sleep he asked someone to read to him the history books of his kingdom. There it was read that it was Mordecai who had saved him from the assassination plot but had not been rewarded for doing so. So the King made some secret plans for Mordecai, too.
- *Give 'the king' the envelope marked, 'Secret 6' to open. Ask your volunteer to read out the 'secret'.*
- Suddenly Haman appeared on the scene and was about to ask the King if he could hang Mordecai on the gallows he had prepared, but before he could speak the king asked him a question. 'Haman, what shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honour?' Now Haman thought to himself 'It must be me!' So he suggested that the king should arrange a big parade for the man he wanted to honour, putting a robe on him and prading him on horesback with someone shouting 'This shall be done to the man in whom the King delights to honour'. Imagine Haman's horror when he discovered it was Mordecai — the man he was going to hang — that the king wanted to reward. The King told Haman to do this immediately for Mordecai and to shout his praises publicly- how humiliating!

SECRET 7 (*Esther's*) — *I have a secret plan: I am going to tell the king about Haman's secret plot.*

- Now it was time for the last part of Esther's secret plot.
- *Give 'Esther' the envelope marked, 'Secret 7' to open. Ask your volunteer to read the 'secret'.*
- At the second party Esther held for the king and Haman, she told the king about Haman's plan to kill all her people, the Jews. The king found out about his plan to hang Mordecai as well. He was very angry with Haman and ordered that he should be hanged on the gallows, instead, the same gallows prepared for Mordecai.
- As a result of Esther's brave and dangerous secret plotting, she had saved her people from extermination. Mordecai became the second in command in the Kingdom after the King. The name Mordecai is considered identical to the name Marduka or Marduku attested as the name of officials in the Persian court in thirty texts from the period of Xerxes I and his father Darius, and may refer to up to four individuals, one of which might very well be the biblical Mordecai.

- Although the King's decree was not allowed to be changed he made a new decree- the Jews were armed and allowed to defend themselves if anyone tried to attack them. As a result, when the 13th of Adar arrived throughout the Persian Empire not only were the Jews saved, but they were able to overcome their enemies and have peace. However, in the walled city of Susa (Biblical Shushan) where Esther was it was once more day before the Jews managed to overcome their enemies and be able to rest. You can imagine the party that happened on the 14th Adar throughout the Empire and on the 15th Adar in Susa.
- For this reason from that time on each year there is a celebration amongst the Jews on the 14th Adar and on the 15th Adar in Jerusalem only (because it is a walled city like Susa). In Esther 9:22 these days are to be days of feasting and joy, giving each other presents and gifts to the poor. Children wear fancy dress, particularly masks. People drink and have fun- there is a party atmosphere. The book of Esther is read out and when Haman's name is mentioned the children spin their ratchets (called 'gragger's) to drown out his name (see Deut 25:19). Special foods are made, the most well known being the Hamantashen pastry. These are said to be shaped like Haman's ear (or some say his hat). Whilst I was in Jerusalem the first time they were celebrating this special feast.
- The name for this feast is 'Purim', named after the lots (purim) that Haman cast to find out on what day he would destroy the Jews.
- The name of God does not appear once in the book of Esther (the only other book like this in the Bible is Song of Songs). However in the Hebrew text the name of God is contained acrostically in 5 places (1:20 'HWHY'; 5:4 'YHWH'; 5:13 'HWHY'; 7:7 'YHWH'; 7:5 'EHYH'-I AM' from Ex 3:15), backwards when the words are being spoken by a Gentile. It is thought this is because the text was written during a time when Jews were not free to mention God's name.

Conclusion

- Many have tried to destroy the Jews in history and failed. During the second World War Hitler killed many Jews and tried to wipe them out by failed. There was a man, Oskar Schindler who was brave like Esther and saved many of them. In the film Schindler's list he is remembered, however at the end he looks at some of his possessions and breaks down wondering why he didn't do more:
Oskar Schindler: I could have got more out. I could have got more. I don't know. If I'd just... I could have got more.
Itzhak Stern: Oskar, there are eleven hundred people who are alive because of you. Look at them.
Oskar Schindler: If I'd made more money... I threw away so much money. You have no idea. If I'd just...
Itzhak Stern: There will be generations because of what you did.
Oskar Schindler: I didn't do enough!
Itzhak Stern: You did so much.
[Schindler looks at his car]
Oskar Schindler: This car. Goeth would have bought this car. Why did I keep the car? Ten people right there. Ten people. Ten more people.
[removing Nazi pin from lapel]
Oskar Schindler: This pin. Two people. This is gold. Two more people. He would have given me two for it, at least one. One more person. A person, Stern. For this.
[sobbing]
Oskar Schindler: I could have gotten one more person... and I didn't! And I... I didn't!
- The change in Schindler came when he realised the price of a life- he typed out a list of those he was going to rescue- this list was like Noah's Ark to the people he was rescuing. Do you have a list? Who is on it? What value do you place on a life?
- If Esther hadn't have been courageous none would have been saved- let's be courageous like Esther and share the Good News of Jesus with those who need it. 'For such a time as this the King has called us'

Prayer: For the gospel to impact those around us. **Eat:** *The Hamantashen!*